

# THE DESERT OF SOULS


HOWARD ANDREW JONES



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# *The Desert of Souls*

HOWARD ANDREW JONES

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*To two great ladies:*

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*For my mother, Shirley Jones, who first guided me to The Shire and Riverworld, helped kindle my imagination, and always believed in my storytelling.*

*For my best friend and muse, Shannon, who brought unflagging energy and a razor-sharp intellect to help breathe these characters and their world to life.*

# *Acknowledgment*

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The parrot lay on the floor of his cage, one claw thrust stiffly toward the tiny wooden swing suspended above him. The black olive clenched in his beak was the definitive sign that Pago was a corpse, for while he had fooled us all by playing dead in the past, he had never failed to consume an olive. To be sure, I nudged the cage. It shook, the swing wobbled, and the bird slid minutely but did not move a single feather of his own accord.

“He is dead,” Jaffar said simply behind me; simply, but with the weight of the universe hung upon the final word.

I turned to my master, who sat with his back to me upon the stone bench of his courtyard. The second-story balcony, from which the cage hung, draped Jaffar in shadow. Beyond him, sunlight played in the rippling water that danced from a fountain. Flowers blossomed upon the courtyard plants and wild birds warbled gaily. Another parrot, in a cage upon the far wall, even called out that it was time for a treat, as he was wont to do. But my master paid no heed to any of this.

I stepped into the sunlight so that I might face him. Upon another bench, nearby, the poet Hamil sat with stylus and paper. There was no love in the look he bestowed me, and he returned to his scribblings with the air of a showman.

“Master,” I said, “I am sorry. I, too, was fond of Pago.”

“Who could not be?” Jaffar asked wearily. He was but a few years younger than my twenty-five, but due to time indoors looked younger still, no matter his full beard. His face was wan, from a winter illness that had also shed some of his plumpness.

“He was the brightest bird here,” Jaffar continued in that same miserable tone.

“Brighter than many in your employ,” Hamil said without looking up.

“Too true,” Jaffar agreed.

“Is there some way that I can help, Master?” I was the captain of Jaffar’s guard and sometimes his confidant; the matter of bird death, however, was outside the field of my knowledge, and I did not understand why he had summoned me. It is true that I had found Pago entertaining, for in addition to playing dead, he could mimic the master and his chief eunuch, and even sometimes answered the call to prayer by bowing thrice. He did this only when it pleased him to do so, which, as my nephew Mahmoud once noted, was far too much like many men he knew. Also Pago had once perched upon the poet’s chest when Hamil had passed out from consuming the fruit of the grape, and pinched his long thin nose heartily. That had pleased me so that I brought Pago the choicest of olives whenever I knew I would pass by his cage.

“Do you suspect he has been killed?” Jaffar asked.

I blinked. “It had not occurred to me.”

“The master lay ill for weeks,” Hamil said with the patient air of one explaining to a simpleton. “Might it be that someone, in failing to poison him, poisoned one of his most cherished companions?”

“It may be,” I replied, wishing that someone had, instead, poisoned the poet, “but the hakim does not believe the master to have been poisoned.”

“The hakim has declined to examine Pago,” Jaffar said, “saying that he is no expert on birds.”

“I shall look at him,” I said. “But, Excellency, if I may be so bold, Pago was your father’s before.”

he became yours. He lived a fine, long span of years. It may be that his fate was writ.”

The master did not answer. I stepped back to the cage containing the rigid parrot, uncertain about what I was expected to see, but fully determined to ape the manner of someone looking with full concentration upon a weighty matter. It occurred to me then that the olive might be poisoned, and so I opened the cage. Pago, dead, was no easier to part from an olive than when he'd been alive, and the tiny beak resisted my attempts to pry it open. I resorted to sawing the olive back and forth until I worked it free. I stepped into the sunlight, the fruit between thumb and forefinger. There was nothing obviously wrong with the olive save the shredding it had endured at my hand. “I see no sign of poison, Master.”

Jaffar sighed. “I did not think there would be.”

“He is but a captain, Master, not an expert of poisons, or birds. Perhaps a specialist should be called.” Hamil seemed determined to make much of this occurrence.

“Perhaps,” I said. “Why don't you go fetch one?”

“I,” the poet said, brandishing his stylus, “am composing a memorial for Pago.”

It was all a bit much, what with the self-important poet and my morbid master, and the parrot's last meal held tightly between my thumb and forefinger, and I chuckled.

The poet's head snapped up. Jaffar fixed me with his own eyes, his brow knitted. The very air was charged then with tension; Jaffar was a kind master, it was true, but he was one of the three most important men in Baghdad and only a fool would mock him to his face.

“He laughs!” said Hamil, and mixed in with his incredulity was a note of pleasure. A stunned smile spread across almost the whole of his narrow face.

“I laugh,” I said, “because an excellent idea has come to me.” I do not know who inspired such a fine lie, but it gave them pause, and at that moment I would have thanked hell-bound Iblis himself if he were responsible.

“What sort of an idea?” the poet prodded, with all the manner of a cat playing with prey.

“I am not sure,” I said, bowing slightly to my master and thinking rapidly, “that it is appropriate to discuss at this time.”

“No, please, Asim,” Jaffar said. By all that was holy, I had gained his interest, and I had no idea whatsoever what I might say. “What is your idea?”

“A diversion,” I managed, thinking as I spoke.

The master raised his hand dismissively. “No poem or pageantry would wash this sorrow from my soul.”

“Of course,” I said, a desperate inkling taking shape, “no ordinary diversion would help. Only a truly unique experience would gladden your wounded heart.”

“I await astonishment,” the poet said quietly, setting down his stylus, “and will be astonished if it arrives.”

“When last the caliph visited, did he not regale you with a fine tale?” I asked.

Jaffar bowed his head in assent. “Yes.”

“He and his comrades dressed in common attire so that they would not be recognized, and walked the streets.” The caliph had said he would have invited Jaffar, had he not lain ill, and, recognizing the disappointment upon my master's face, told him he hoped Jaffar would join him on some similar

venture in the future. The master had mentioned the incident regretfully a number of times since.

Jaffar shook his head. "Yes, but the caliph hunts this week. I cannot venture forth with him."

"I had not forgotten, Master. It is my idea that you venture forth with comrades of your own, so that you might have an adventure to share with the caliph upon his return."

Jaffar did not brighten, exactly; his head rose and he ceased movement altogether. The little poet watched him for reaction, probably wondering whether he should mock or praise me, though he would certainly prefer the former. At the upturning of the master's lips, Hamil quickly said, "I think you have something there, Asim. If you go on this mad enterprise, Master, I hope that you will allow me to accompany you, so that I may record all that transpires."

Jaffar was nodding. "Yes—it would be good to leave the palace. We might go down to the market and see what has come from downriver. In disguise, I would be bothered only by beggars."

He referred indirectly to the courtiers who would always swarm about him wherever it was that he set his feet.

"Indeed, Master. But Hamil should remain so that he may finish his composition in silence."

"Hah! Who then will tell the story to the caliph?"

"I will do the telling," Jaffar said.

"But surely"—the poet halted in midsentence—"You need men of wit to accompany you. What does Asim plan? A trio of guardsmen, I suppose?"

He knew me too well. That is exactly what I had planned. A brief foray out; my master well protected. I smiled only.

"You might as well go in accompaniment of dung merchants," the poet said. "Nay, you need more. Allow me to suggest other companions, as well."

"Nay, Master," I said. "Take the scholar Dabir. He is crafty, and does not lack for wit."

Jaffar nodded and climbed to his feet. "That is a fine thought. Go and gather him. Tell him that we shall meet at the west servants' entrance. Just after midday prayers. Oh—tell him not to wear anything extravagant. You, too, should disguise yourself. Something common."

I bowed. "I hear and obey."

The poet was still politely protesting as I left the courtyard and made my way through the palace halls. The master's palace was nearly the size of the caliph's, and no place for an aimless search. While I was friendly with Dabir, I did not know him so well that I was familiar with his rounds, and thus I asked directions from one of the slaves.

The little man bowed. "At this hour he is most likely tutoring the mistress, Sabirah, off the main courtyard."

Of course. It was only my miraculous escape from potential dismissal or death that had left me unthinking. The slave's expression was blank, but there was a hint of derision in his tone, as if all the palace surely knew Dabir's daytime assignment. I left him and made my way through the hall.

That a male tutor should be used for the master's niece had set many tongues to wagging. The situation had begun after our return from the dig in Kalhu, where my actions and those of Dabir had not only brought us higher in the eyes of Jaffar, but, through him, garnered a word of praise from the caliph himself. The master had brought me closer into his confidence, and augmented Dabir's position, entrusting him with the teaching of his beloved niece.



Sabirah's father, Musa, had declared that as God had seen fit to bless his daughter with such an excellent mind, God must have meant for it to be used. Musa had been appointed governor of Syria but had left his eldest child in Jaffar's care with instructions that she receive the best education available in Baghdad.

I neared the twin doors to the room where she was being taught and caught the warm tones of a young woman's laughter from within. She sounded no brighter than any other girl. I rapped on one door and then walked straight in, as was my right as guard captain.

Two crones looked up from a backgammon table. They apparently did not mind their charge giggling at a man, but fixed me with a glare that would shrivel a ready groom. Dabir and Sabirah sat at a nearby table, each holding a book.

I did not look first at Dabir, but to Sabirah. Though I sometimes saw her without a veil, she had been told to wear thick ones while under Dabir's tutelage. In that day, amongst the wealthy folk, it was not uncommon to show hair, but this too was concealed. She was a slip of a thing, with a slim nose. For myself, I preferred a woman of more ample curve, but I admit that her eyes were large and clear and her voice sweet.

"Good morning, Captain," she said.

"Good morning, Mistress. Forgive this interruption."

"The mistress is taking lessons," one of the crones told me curtly.

"Are they lessons in courtesy?" I asked her, then looked back to Jaffar's niece.

Sabirah's eyes crinkled as though she smiled.

"I come at your uncle's behest to fetch Dabir," I told her.

"He's not in trouble, is he?"

"Oh, no."

"Why do you need him?"

She had me there. Apparently my well of inspiration had run dry for the morning, and I stood statue-still for a moment too long trying to think of an explanation that did not reveal my purpose.

"It must be something very important," Sabirah prompted.

"Yes," I agreed, though it was not important in the way that she supposed. Doubtless behind her eyes lurked the fancies of a maid; that Dabir was needed to consult about some important affairs of state involving marriages and horses, most like. In truth, I felt suddenly awkward, for I understood then that if I had maintained my composure around the stupid poet, the girl, the scholar, and the crones would have gone the morning uninterrupted.

"Take him if you must, then," Sabirah said. "Though I would gladly have read more."

"Read on," Dabir said, "while I gather my things. First in the original, then translate."

The girl began to recite curiously worded Greek.

Dabir stood, searching me with a look. His eyes were a clear blue, more vibrant than that of the blue jubbah he wore, a gift from Jaffar. In those days the hair below his turban was dark and thick. There was no gray yet in the well-trimmed beard, shaped spadelike below his lips, nor in the mustache perched above. Elsewise his beard was thin, only following the shape of his jaw. He searched, I think for some reassurance that all was truly well, and I nodded once.

"Some lucky Thracian has my noble shield," Sabirah continued. "I had to drop it in a wood. But

got clean away, praise God. I'll get another, just as good."

Dabir chuckled as he stuffed his own papers and a stack of books into his satchel. "Quite right. You see?"

"It mocks the Spartans," Sabirah said.

"Yes. What do you think? Is pragmatism more important than glory?"

Sabirah stared into space as Dabir closed his satchel.

"It must depend upon the circumstance. Practicality might excuse evil practice."

Dabir nodded. "Well said. Keep reading; we will meet again in the morning."

"You won't be traveling, will you, Captain?" Sabirah asked me.

"Not very far," I said. I judged by her look that my reply brought no satisfaction, but she wished us good day and said nothing further.

Dabir and I walked at each other's side then, down the hall.

"What has happened?" he asked.

I told him that Pago had died and that the master craved a diversion. "Hamil had suggested he go. I thought of you."

"I see," he said, not sounding especially pleased.

I bade him stop in the shadow of a column, and lowered my voice. "It is folly, but I hope to make the best of it. The master desires clever conversation. You can provide that, but you also have a head upon your shoulders. I expect you to help me keep watch upon him."

"Where does he intend to go?" Dabir asked.

"He mentioned the market."

"We should shape his steps, then, to safe places."

"They must also hold his interest," I said.

"Of course. Do you suppose we should take him to a seller of birds?"

"I would prefer to keep his mind from the parrot."

I conveyed the rest of the master's instructions. Dabir listened without question and then departed, he for his preparations, me for mine.

All too soon came the call to prayers, and then I hastened to the west servants' entrance. There I found Dabir already attending the master. The scholar had donned a dusty brown robe. Jaffar smiled and nodded to me. Boulos, the plump old eunuch, stood behind him, making final adjustments to the master's turban, which seemed especially bedraggled. On any other day the master would have pitched the dirty cloth through a window. His own jubbah was threadbare and stained; I am not sure from where it had come, but it was considerably worse than my own travel garments. It did not quite worry me in truth, for his beard was so well trimmed, his nails so clean that he seemed less a poor man than a child playing dress up. The master was well known for his handsome face and fine figure—though of course poets exaggerated—and he carried himself with confidence that belied his clothing.

"How do I look?" he asked me.

"Your garments are suitably ragged," I replied.

"I was thinking," Boulos said, "that a smudge of dirt upon one cheek might complete the look."

"Do you think?" Jaffar asked. He turned to me.

I wished to say that he would then resemble a clown, but Boulos, no matter that he was slave and

eunuch, had more power within the palace than I, and only an idiot antagonized him.

“It would be a fine touch,” Dabir said, “but the girls will look with less favor upon His Excellency then.”

“I seek adventure, not wives,” Jaffar said.

“Oh, you should always be prepared,” Boulos said cheerily. “Who knows when God shall send some tidbit to cross your path?” He and Jaffar laughed; I groaned inwardly.

Boulos bent to buckle on Jaffar’s sword belt.

“Is it sharp?” my master asked.

“It was seen to. I found you an older sheath, though.”

“Thank you, Boulos,” Jaffar said, and again I groaned internally, for a proper warrior would see to his own weapon; it had not even occurred to Jaffar to be embarrassed to ask. He turned eagerly to us. “I’m quite pleased with all this. Are you two ready?”

“We await only your word, Master.” I bowed.

“This was a fine idea, Asim,” Jaffar said. Boulos hustled forward; the two guards waiting to either side of the door pretended not to notice us, although they reached for the door pulls.

The master held up a hand and the sentries stepped back. “I’m sure you know,” he said as he turned to us, “that you are not to call me by title, or, indeed, by any honorific whatsoever, once we leave the palace.”

“Of course, Master,” I said.

“Of course, *Andar*,” Jaffar corrected with a smile. “I am to have an adventure, so why not name myself after one of the greatest adventurers?”

“An excellent idea,” Boulos said. “Captain, see him safely home.”

“Of course.”

“What time shall we expect your return, Master?” Boulos asked.

“There is no telling,” Jaffar replied. “We may be gone through the night.” He turned to the door, thought better of it, and faced Boulos again with raised finger, as though he were ticking off a point from an invisible list. “Do not let word spread of our adventure.”

“Of course not, Master.”

“Dabir, Asim, let us be off.”

Once more the sentries reached for the doors, eyes focused blankly above our own, lest they be on a secret they should not know. Outside was bright and fragrant, for even here at one of the side entrances were a row of bushes in bloom. It was but a short walk to the gate in the outer wall, likewise guarded by sentries. One opened the gate for us while the other advanced to push back the crowd of folk who tend to gather about all palace entrances. Dabir and the master and I stepped around them; the assorted beggars and job applicants and onlookers watched us curiously; one even pulled Dabir’s robe, pleading for alms, and then we were past.

I think the master was more bewildered than amazed by the cacophony of the streets. Baghdad teemed with people and their attendant smells, and we were in the thick of both. It is not that the master had never been out of his mansion, it is just that he never ventured forth without a buffer of servants and guardians.

When Jaffar asked where we should go, Dabir suggested first the nearby market in south A

Rusafa, the wealthiest quarter of the city, where we spent the greater part of the next hour. Merchants could not know the master's true identity, but even a fool could tell at a glance that he was a nobleman in disguise because of his fine manner. They bade him look at the best of their baubles and silks and perfumes and nearly everything else under the sun. Jaffar paid them little heed, but he examined much, listening with interest to the outrageous lies regarding the rarity of certain cloths, or the unmatched skill of a bootmaker's leatherwork. He was especially taken by the elaborate tale of one jeweler's perilous trip to Baghdad from India. I found it tiresome and stepped away. Dabir joined me

"Is *your* sword sharp?" he asked quietly.

I did not take his meaning at first, then saw his sly smile and chuckled.

"We must give thought as to our next course," Dabir said, "for he will grow bored."

"There is a place across the river where men often race pigeons," I said.

"That involves birds, though," Dabir wisely pointed out, and I nodded agreement.

"Do you suppose he would like to see some wrestling?" I asked.

At that moment Jaffar returned, passing each of us a small gold ring.

"Thank you ... Andar," I said. Dabir echoed me. I slipped the thing over my smallest finger and admired the effect.

"It is my pleasure." Jaffar ignored the beckoning calls of other merchants and turned his head the other way and that, searching the distance. Because the market was crowded, there was not much to be seen but the turbans and backs of shopping folk.

"The jeweler spoke to me of a woman who deals in magical things. She is down one of these side streets."

Dabir and I traded a quick look while the master was looking the other way.

"Is it not said that upright men should turn their face from magics?" I asked.

"Andar," Dabir said, "our last encounter with magic was ... somewhat..."

"There will be no Greeks involved this time," Jaffar said airily. "Besides, *that* wasn't real magic."

Dabir and I exchanged a glance. The master had never fully believed our accounting of the evening with the Greeks, having been drugged at the time. "*This*," he continued, "is simple marketplace magic in our own city. There can be no real harm. Let us seek her. The jeweler said she is very good."

"She is probably the man's aunt," I said, "who will share our monies with him."

"Asim, must you always grumble so?" the master asked. "I thought we were going to have food today. Let us see this magic woman, then find some food."

I would have preferred that we find the food first, for I had neglected a proper meal while preparing for this venture, but Dabir and I followed the master down a winding side street, stepping past running urchins and around a series of foul-smelling brown puddles. After a time it was clear that Jaffar had become lost, so we gave alms to a graybeard who then provided directions, and in the next quarter hour we sat on the rugs within a small, dark front room. From elsewhere in the house came the enticing sound of sizzling meat and a most pleasing scent of lamb.

None was offered us, though, by the stripling who had answered the door and told us to sit, and nothing was offered us by the bent woman who emerged from behind the curtained doorway and bade us welcome to her home. Her voice was like that of an old songbird, for it was clear, but tired, and

little thin. She fished for information about us, as fortune-tellers do, whether we were young men looking for wives or taking a break from important business, all the time watching us with dark eyes. In the shadowy room there was no seeing through her veil, and her gaze revealed no emotion or sign of her thoughts. I took in the room, ordered neatly with strange things, both rare and humble. High shelves stood out from the dark walls. I could see few of the contents perched on those directly to my right, so close were we to the wall itself, though I thought I saw a small bird's claw hanging off one ledge. On the shelf to my left was a hodgepodge of wooden balls adorned with strange symbols, chips of colored stone, a clay goblet decorated with what looked to be emeralds, and the mummified head of a ferret. The peculiarity of these items lent an ominous mien even to the more mundane trappings—that kettle hung from a rafter, for instance, might hold more than emptiness. And what had those dark wooden spoons on the wall been stirring?

My sword lay ready to hand and so too did my knife. As my fingers brushed over its hilt I felt the magic woman's eyes upon us. Just then she asked us for coin and Jaffar revealed his station by bidding me pay an initial fee. The woman passed the coins without comment to one of two similarly dressed youths, identical in feature and hair save that one was a few inches taller. He disappeared briefly then returned with small pastries, which he sat before us. He retreated again. The older boy sat quietly upon a stool in the shadows.

"You seek magic," the woman said, sitting. "Why?"

"Because I am curious," Jaffar answered.

"You are bored." The woman glanced over at me as I munched on a treat. It was fresh, and seasoned with honey. It can never be said that I dislike sweets. "Do you seek magic only because you are bored?" she asked Jaffar.

"My friend has witnessed true magic," Dabir said. "Dark magic. He has no interest in that."

The master's mouth turned down at this.

The woman turned to Dabir, appraising. "What sort of magic does he desire?"

Jaffar spoke up. "A merchant outside told us you are gifted with an understanding of future events. I would hear them."

"Would you?" She cocked one of her thick gray eyebrows. She leaned closer, her voice dropping. "Do you know for what you ask? It is a dangerous thing to know one's fate. The knowledge has driven some mad. Some spend the whole of their lives twisting and turning and scheming to avoid what they have been told, until they realize they are wrapped within the coils of the serpent they thought they could escape."

"We are not afraid," Jaffar said.

Perhaps he was not; I covertly made the sign warding against evil, hiding it behind my thigh.

She paused a moment more, staring into his eyes. "You have paid the price," she spoke without sentiment, "and I will honor your coin with my service."

She motioned to the boy, who brought forth short red candles, which she lit. They gave off but a little smoke. She then presented us with parchment, one small square each, of a peculiar wrinkled texture.

"What manner of paper is this?" Dabir asked.

"It is fashioned from the skin of Egyptian cats," she said, whereupon my master fell to examining

his own paper more closely. In truth it did not look to me to be animal skin, but I said nothing.

Then came the presentation of an especially old-looking stone inkwell, in which black ink rested and a pen with a marvelously colorful feather. This she handed to my master.

“Breathe deep of the candle fumes, then write your name upon this parchment and set it within the bowl.” At this word, the youth placed a small brown bowl before each of us. I looked at Dabir wondering if he too were concerned by Jaffar revealing his name to this woman, but he kept silent. Jaffar hesitated not at all.

My master leaned close to breathe in of the candle—which smelled faintly of cloves—put the parchment across his knee, and boldly wrote out his name. He then folded the paper and set it within the bowl. Next was my turn, and then Dabir’s, who had watched us closely at work.

In light of later events, I wish that I had paid closer heed to how the woman brought the bowls to her, but I saw only that she reached forth and set them near. She closed her eyes and began droning indistinct syllables. I thought them words of magic, and made again the sign casting off evil. It may be that she spoke some prayer. Whatever it was, she sat thus, with eyes closed, and back straight, mumbling for some minutes. The fumes spun about us and the flames of the candles flickered and the air felt heavy. The atmosphere was cavernous, as though we were somewhere quiet and secret, deep beneath the earth, rather than a mere few feet from the entrance to a Baghdad alley.

When the woman’s eyes opened, it was with such suddenness that my master flinched. Trancelike she reached for each bowl, held the parchment over the nearest candle, and dropped it back within. Three times she did this. Dabir started to say something, but held his tongue. The master and I were silent, though he glanced over at me, eyes alight with excitement.

Each of the papers flared and went out, leaving black ashes that glowed red at their tips; these the magic worker stirred clockwise three times with her fingers and observed in turn, her eyes blinking seldom. Finally she set the last of them down, and straightened.

“I have read the fates. Be warned—you may not wish to hear.”

“Speak!” Jaffar demanded, breathless.

“You.” Her gaze fastened upon Dabir. “You shall be known far and wide as a slayer of monsters and protector of the caliphate. Fame will go before and after you; heroes shall listen to tell of your exploits with envious ears.”

Dabir’s brow furrowed and he looked as though he might have asked for further detail, but the woman’s eyes fell upon me. I found that I could not help but meet them, and it was not at all like staring into the eyes of a courtesan; it was more like studying the immensity of the night sky above the desert.

“Your bravery will not be unknown, but in later days it will grow when you will take up the difficult weapons of pen and parchment; the fruits of these labors shall carry your name down the ages.”

Her veil rippled when she turned to face Jaffar. “High have you risen and higher still shall you rise, until you lose your head when you dare to love a woman beyond your station. Your master will weep, but he shall not spare you.”

The master blinked, then stared with rapt fascination and horror. His mouth opened, moved up and down, yet no sound came forth.

“You stand at a juncture,” the woman said to all of us. “If you delay, if you do not rise and take immediately to the street, none of this shall come to pass, and your lives shall be forgotten in the greater misery that shall follow.”

“Ah—” the master began, but the woman’s head fell forward, her shoulders slumped, and her breathing grew shallow. The stripling hurried to her side, and she reached feebly for him. He helped her rise.

“My grandmother must rest,” he said in a high piping voice. “No more than a few moments. If you wish to ask her further about her sight, you may wait.”

She leaned heavily upon him as he guided her through the curtains. My master meanwhile was still silently working his mouth, as though continued exercise might see sound evolve there.

“I suppose,” he said eventually, “that we should depart.” Saying this, he rose, staring hard at Dabir. He stared hard at him again as I opened the door. I did not think him happy. Who would be after such news?

Sunlight flew at us in a blinding rectangle, and the noise of people haggling just down the street and the laughter of children, even the snort of a horse, reached us with all the scents of the bustling city. I preceded both men, surveying the street as my eyes adjusted.

The master was quiet as we walked, and his tread was slow.

“I would not trouble myself overmuch about any of this,” Dabir said, by the sound of his voice smiling as he spoke. I thought it false cheer.

“I do not know what to think,” Jaffar said. “Did you not hear the truth in her words? There was magic there.”

I dropped back to his side. “There may have been, Ma—yes.” I had forgotten what I was supposed to call him.

“But I think, perhaps, that she confused the bowls. Consider.” Jaffar raised a finger. “Dabir is not a slayer of monsters, he is a scholar! Surely she must have meant you, Asim. *You* are the warrior. I think that God plans great things for you.”

“I hope so, Master.”

“And me—I have often thought that I might take pen in hand. I have been inspired to create many stories, but never set them down. You have heard me tell of some of them, I think?”

“Yes,” I agreed, though I had always thought he went on a bit long before reaching his point.

Now Jaffar looked long at Dabir, even as we stepped in to the main street.

“She must have confused her fortunes,” the master said with surety. “There is no other explanation. Dabir, do not think me harsh, but I think you should leave my service. For your own safety.”

“Master—” Dabir began.

“Andar,” Jaffar corrected. “My niece is fair, I know. She is young and well spoken, and it was unwise for me to present her with a tutor instead of a suitor.” He smiled. “You see,” he confided to me, “I do have a way with words.” He looked back at Dabir. “Clearly the woman confused the bowls.”

I brushed past a kneeling man begging with upthrust and dirty arms, fearful no longer for myself but for my friend, whose livelihood was jeopardized because I had suggested he join us.

“Master—Andar—she was just an old woman in a rude hut. If she were truly a mistress of magic

would she not reside in a palace walled with rubies and emeralds? Surely we can look upon it all as  
jest. A lark.”

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I saw from Jaffar’s expression that he was not convinced.

Again he raised that index finger of his. “I think—”

I was never to learn what he thought, for at that very moment a bleeding man stumbled into our  
path, clutched vainly at Jaffar’s robe, then pitched into the dust before us.



Before I could draw breath, four bold rogues rounded the corner and stopped short at the heels of the wounded man. Three wore fine clothes shabbily treated, as if they liked the look of them but did not know their proper care. More to the point, swords were in their hands.

I slung free my sword; I knew a surge of pleasure as the weapon came clear and sat in my fist curved and gleaming. It was a blade my father had won from a Turk. In practiced hands, its shape allowed faster unsheathing than the straight blades borne by most folk of the caliphate.

“Back, dogs!” I said.

The first of the ruffians, broad-shouldered and large-bellied, gave way. “That man is a thief,” he said, pointing at the fellow lying before us.

I pressed forward a half step. “Then the magistrate will decide his fate.”

“He has something that belongs to us.” This from the second man, tall and rangy, with a dirty turban. The third, big-boned and surly, was like enough in mien to be his brother.

The fourth of them watched quietly. He was smaller than his companions and dressed simply, but he did not discount him. They were oxen, he was a snake. Angered oxen are dangerous, true, but are mostly bluster and would sooner stand about eating grass or chasing females. A snake kills for its living.

Dabir stepped to my side and drew his own sword. There is, of course, a vast gulf separating the competent from the skilled, but the ruffians could not see that gulf as Dabir took a confident stance and he held his blade well.

Jaffar, behind us, had knelt and was speaking softly to the injured man, but I could not hear, for the fat rogue spoke again.

“He has stolen our property,” he said petulantly. “Give aid to honest citizens and step aside.”

“That may be,” Dabir said. “Let us sheath weapons and consult reasonably.”

This puzzled the fat one, who glanced to his right, where the snake waited.

“Kill them,” the little man hissed.

The fat man bellowed, as is the manner of bulls, and charged Dabir. The tall one leapt at me with an overhand swing. I sidestepped and his blade whished past even as my own sliced through his abdomen. I was certain of the strike and did not watch the impact or subsequent fall, for my eyes were already upon the one with the surly grimace. He, too, charged, and his strike at my head was more skilled than his comrade’s. Almost I threw up my right shoulder, but I remembered I did not wear armor, and dropped to one knee. I felt the wind of the sword’s passage over my head.

There are those who say combat is a whirlwind that leaves no time for thought. I find that the world seems slowed at such moments, also that my thinking is clear and steady, and that my soul sings with life.

Dabir and the fat man traded wary blows to my left while the snake watched.

I sprang to my feet. The big-boned one caught my blow with a desperate swing. There was power there, but no finesse, and I locked blades and forced his down and offside. He was wide open, and his eyes were wide as my sword tip sliced across the front of his throat. Blood sprayed. He clutched his ruined neck with his hands as he fell.

The snake cursed, backed away, and darted off. The fat man sprinted after him, puffing heavily. Both disappeared around a house and I started to follow before recalling my first duty was safeguard Jaffar.

My master had turned the man over onto his back. Dabir sheathed his unbloodied blade and knelt now at the dying man's side, seeking for his wound. A simple look at his blood-soaked clothing told me there was no bandage wide enough to save him—surely there was more blood without than within. His face was pale as winter sky.

Yet Dabir exposed a wound in the man's trunk and was wiping the blood and gore clear with the fellow's clothing so that he might see the extent of the injury. Jaffar, a kind man, cradled the fellow's head and pressed a water sac to his lips.

The fellow drank once, then shook his head, agitated. "The door," he muttered. "You must tell the caliph..."

"The caliph?" Jaffar asked. "What?"

"The door—the door pulls. Do not let them put them on..."

The master looked up at me, then back down at the man, whose eyes relaxed and looked upon the angels and the glory of God.

While Jaffar considered the dead man soberly, Dabir investigated his satchel.

I do not mean to suggest that I am now, or that I was then, a connoisseur of doors or the ornamentation, but like most folk who have made their home in cities, I have seen many doors, and as an intimate of the powerful, I have passed through or by my share of doorways gilt with decorative patterns and precious things. I remember few details about them, but I still vividly recall the splendid door pull Dabir discovered in the dead man's belongings, gleaming all the brighter for its rustic container. The pull itself was a solid ring of gold, held in the mouth of an exquisitely rendered roaring lion. It was set into a gold plaque bearing three rubies, beneath which was peculiar writing—geometric shapes and lines like chicken scratches. Dabir had once told me that folk in olden days were still perfecting their letters and had not yet designed beautiful script.

Upon finding this pull within the dead man's satchel Jaffar immediately declared that he wished Dabir to translate the writing, also that he hoped to place it upon one of his own doors. He wondered aloud if a craftsman might be found to fashion its twin. He seemed to have momentarily forgotten that he had dismissed the scholar. Dabir puzzled over the thing only briefly before lowering it back into the satchel.

"All this," he said, rising and taking in the three bodies with a sweep of his hand, "is part of a greater mystery. He sought for you, Andar."

"Do you think so?"

"He was one of those who waited outside the palace when we left this morning," Dabir answered. "I must examine all these bodies before they are shrouded. We may yet learn more from them."

Jaffar agreed.

A crowd had gathered swiftly after the spill of blood, and I spread enough coins around that no one was troubled too much over the renting of a cart, horse, and the rug we threw over the bodies. The master meant us to return immediately.

We reached the palace in late afternoon and grimacing slaves conveyed the bodies to the same

workroom where Dabir usually tutored Sabirah.

After the corpses had been deposited upon the old rugs, Dabir put down the satchel and suggested I set to work, saying that he would return soon with books.

“What will I look for?” I asked.

“Study them, Asim! You do not lack wit. See what you can learn. I shall be back soon.”

He departed, and I was left alone with the three dead men and a smattering of flies, busy about the blood. I hoped we would be through the task soon, for the flies were certain not to diminish in number.

I stood at the booted feet, staring down at the bodies. Dabir had instructed that they lie faceup. I scratched my beard and wondered when the slaves would bring the food. I'd had naught but tinned pastries since morn.

I had seen enough death that bodies did not trouble me overmuch. In truth, apart from the corpses and the flies, it was rather a comforting room, paneled with dark teak and decorated with old Persian wall hangings. One I especially liked showed Rostam's taming of the horse Rakhsh, his lariat depicted with such skill it looked somehow like it had just been flung. A crowd of elders looked on the youth with horror, and one fat fellow was actually chewing his beard in consternation down in the corner of the tapestry. His expression made me chuckle.

I then bethought of the dead men and held off laughing, stepping over to the bank of scalloped windows. Here, too, was a goodly sight, for Dabir's study looked out on another of the master's gardens, one floor below. I breathed in the scent of water from the fountain, and took in a faint scent of rose as well.

Still there came no food, so I looked over the other tapestry, considered the scrollwork on the large chests against the wall, glanced at the red and blue glazed game pieces the crones had left to see who was winning, then returned at last to the corpses.

The door opened, but instead of a slave with food I faced the poet, who slid through and closed the portal behind him. His mocking smile disappeared quickly as he considered the grisly display. He tugged on his wispy beard.

“Are you through with your poem?” I asked.

“Almost.” He joined me by the bodies. “The master said many curious things had transpired, and that he was going to write of them. What are these?”

“Dead men.”

“What wit! Did you slay them?”

I only grunted and looked down at the slain men once more. I expected the poet to grow bored and leave me be.

“Why do you stare so? Do you admire your handiwork?”

“Dabir set me to examining the bodies.”

“For what?”

“For information.”

“You seem somewhat far away to learn much information.”

“You seem somewhat sober for a drunkard.”

“Huh. I would see this gold the master spoke of.”

“It is there, in the satchel.”

Hamil stepped around me while I considered what might be learned from the dead. Two were murderers and thieves, one was a victim. I could tell that the victim had once taken greater care with his person than the other two had likely ever known, but his clothing was travel-worn, his face and hair dirty with road dust.

“This is quite a treasure,” the poet said from my right.

“Yes.” I glanced over, saw him slide the pull back in the satchel.

“And Dabir can read the language on the gold?”

“I believe he went to find some books about them.”

Hamil came and stood at my elbow. He was a short, slight fellow, and the height of his turban was barely level with my eyes.

“Have you seen to their money yet?”

“No,” I answered.

“Let’s count it, then. Those money bags look full.”

I couldn’t see how that would help anything, but it was a better suggestion than I had developed and had been offered without malice. “Very well,” I said, and in a short time we had cut free the coin purses, dumped their contents in a pile, and sorted them. I kept watch on the poet to see that he palmed no coins, but he seemed motivated more by curiosity than avarice.

There was more in those purses than I would have guessed, but the poet and I separated the money into piles in a short time. We were uncertain what to do then, but fortunately for us, the servant arrived at last with food, so we washed, moved the platters away from the bodies, and set to eating. It was one of the few amicable moments Hamil and I had ever shared, united as we were both by the mystery of the events and our own consternation, for we could not imagine that anything useful might be learned from the dead men’s possessions.

We were to be rudely surprised.

As I was wiping my hands on a napkin, Dabir entered, burdened with books and scrolls. I hurried to assist him as the poet rose with a greeting.

I caught one of the scrolls as it rolled about on top of Dabir’s stack. “What did you find?” he asked me.

“More coins than you might think.”

Dabir set the books and papers on a table and walked to the piles of money, which he eyed critically.

“We counted them for you,” the poet told him.

“You mixed the coin purses together?” Dabir sounded horrified.

“Yes,” Hamil answered.

Dabir put his hand to his face.

“What?” I asked.

“Are you trying to ruin me, Asim?”

“What is it?” I was solicitous; I was all too aware that I had put the man’s career in jeopardy by suggesting his name to Jaffar earlier today.

“Which coins came from which man? Do you have any idea?”

The poet and I traded glances. “Well,” I ventured, “the man who had the door pull had few coins

upon him at all. The others had a month's wages."

"Your pardon—what could the coins tell us?" Hamil asked.

"All manner of things," Dabir said quietly, "to those who would look."

"I looked," I said, "but I did not see anything."

"Exactly! Those Greek coins, there—from whom did they come?"

"The ones who attacked us," I answered.

"Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure? It might be important!"

"I'm sure," I answered, although now that he mentioned it, I couldn't be, completely.

"He is right," the poet said.

"Why do you think these Greek coins were in the possession of these men?" Dabir asked.

"They're Greeks?" the poet offered helpfully.

"No, a Greek paid them," Dabir said. He stepped to one of the bodies. "Look here, at these men and their finery. These are not their normal clothes, judging by their treatment. Do they otherwise seem the sort of men to wear such excellent garments?"

"Do you think them stolen?" the poet asked.

"No—see how well they fit. These are but recently purchased. Someone paid them well to do something."

"Somebody Greek," I said.

"Probably." So saying, Dabir bent over the men who'd attacked us and tore open their jubbahs to reveal old, stained undergarments, as though to confirm his earlier suspicion. He studied their footgear momentarily, then spent a much longer time going over the victim, inspecting boots, belt, sleeve, even his beard. The poet hovered nearby, watching all.

"What do you see?" Hamil asked.

"These two are no more than we supposed. I would we could trace them back to the neighborhood from which they were hired, but I lack the necessary information. This man, though..."

Dabir undid the fellow's sword belt and opened his robe. Beneath it was a thin white garment. "His sudre. He was Magian. Note also the belt he wears here. I glimpsed it while I was seeing to his wound."

"A wool belt? It holds nothing up."

"It is a symbol of faith. Those who revere the fire tie and untie it while praying. It is woven," Dabir continued, "from seventy-two threads, to honor one of their holy texts."

"Was it a Magian door pull?" I asked.

"It does not seem to be." Dabir climbed to his feet. "Hamil, would you call for the slaves? The men must be shrouded. This other—the Magians have different rites."

"The fire worshippers leave their dead exposed to the elements," the poet said. "As like we can throw him into the alley."

"They do not worship the fire," Dabir said. He sounded faintly annoyed. "Do you worship the sun upon which you kneel?"

Hamil stared at Dabir in answer.

"Send word for a Magian priest. They will want the body. It may be that they will recognize the man."

The poet bowed his head and left without complaint. I did not yet understand that Dabir could inspire people who might normally be contentious into aiding him because they desired involvement in the unraveling of his mystery.

Dabir carefully rubbed his hands with a cake of soap and rinsed them in the bowl of water the slaves had brought, then considered the food. The sherbet had melted; Dabir selected a wrinkled fig.

“Dabir,” I said, “if you translate the scratches on the door pull, Jaffar will be so pleased he is likely to forget the magic woman’s words.”

“He will not forget. He knows I can translate this, which he desires. If it pleases him, he will pay me on to some other house, likely the caliph’s.”

I smiled. “Then you will wax higher.”

His look was dark and long, and I could not escape the feeling he thought me stupid at that moment. His tone, when finally he spoke, was not welcoming. “The caliph’s household is large; he is surrounded already by courtiers who do not wish for rivals. And I am not especially interested in sparring with them for a place. Besides, I am pleased with my work here. Was pleased.”

I spread my hands. “Allow me to speak with Jaffar, on your behalf. I think I can persuade—”

“You have done enough, I think, today.” Dabir sat down heavily with one of the books and began to read. He made no other sign to me, nor did he speak.

Almost I spoke against his rudeness, but I held my tongue as I departed, though I did not leave off slamming the door behind me. Somehow it did not satisfy.

It occurred to me that the old woman had, indeed, confused the bowls and that Jaffar likely did Dabir a favor that he did not appreciate; moreover, that if it had not been for me, Dabir would not have learned he was destined to die for love of Sabirah. Now he might yet change his fate, if such a thing could be done, and he had me to thank.

I spent the rest of the afternoon rounding through my duties; inspecting the arms of the men, the organization of the barracks, and the overall security of the palace. All the men under my command there were dependable, for Jaffar had given me authority to hire and fire as needed, but that did not mean they were not tempted sometimes to cut corners. I set three to work polishing helmets that had been neglected.

For most of that afternoon and early evening I thought only of my duties, but my mind turned occasionally to Dabir and the bodies and the pull. Would he be able to translate the thing, and what would it say? Were the men I’d slain after it solely because it was gold, or had they, too, valued the words? Would I be renowned as a slayer of monsters? What monsters, and from whence would they come?

What use asking questions for which I had no answers? I put them from my mind.

I was leaning over a shatranj board across from my nephew Mahmoud—my chief lieutenant—just after evening prayers, when there came a knock upon the door. Mahmoud bade the knocker to enter and Boulos himself stuck in his head and asked for me. The chief eunuch explained why as we walked.

“Mistress Sabirah desires a word with you,” he said.

“What is this about?”

“You do not know?” he asked.

“No.”

“Hmm. I was hoping you did.” He chewed on that thought a moment as we advanced through the shadowy corridors. Here and there torches flickered in cressets set into pillars, but despite their evening always lent the palace a cavernous feel. Expensive carpets dulled our passage, but every eight feet or so there was a gap, and our boot heels would echo on the flagstones for two paces before we crossed again to fabric.

“Did you really slay two men in the space of a single breath?” Boulos asked.

I thought for a moment. “Perhaps three breaths.”

“Zip, zip, zip!” Boulos brandished an imaginary sword before him, then chuckled. “A Magician priest arrived and spoke with Dabir at length before leaving with the other fellow’s body. I would give much to know what they said! You know how closemouthed Dabir is. And he seems in a mood besides.”

“He said nothing to me.”

Boulos tried prying out more information about our trip, but I was seasoned enough to ask if Jaffar had shared details with him yet, and Boulos was wise enough to admit to me that the master had not.

“The master,” I said, “may intend to surprise the caliph with the story and not wish it spread.”

“You can tell me, Asim, for I am the very soul of discretion.”

“Boulos,” I said, “you are known far and wide as a fine relayer of tales, which is to be commended. But in this instance, it is not to be encouraged.”

Boulos pouted, but fortunately by this time we had reached the harem. Here the halls were not so lofty, and more narrow as well, though decorated with even finer hangings. Gold filagree showed upon some of the door lintels. The floors were of stained wood.

He conducted me through the central hall and into Sabirah’s apartments. She sat beside a screened window, through which fading sunlight shone. A candle flickered upon the sill.

Boulos and I were both permanent fixtures of the house; he the chief slave and me guardian of the family blood, and thus Sabirah did not bother with the veil. Perhaps it was the wan light or her grim countenance, but she seemed older than her eighteen years. One of her serving girls sat in the corner reciting a sura. Sabirah corrected her, then requested she leave off.

“Mistress,” Boulos said, “here is Captain Asim, as you requested.”

“Thank you, Boulos. You may go.”

“You do not wish me to remain?” There was almost a rebuke in the tone of the smiling eunuch’s question.

“Ghadya is here,” Sabirah said, flicking her fingers toward the serving girl.

Still Boulos hesitated.

Sabirah was unexpectedly sharp-tongued. “Do you linger because you did not hear, because you do not trust the captain, or because you are desperate for new gossip?”

Boulos bowed. “Your pardon, Mistress.” He bowed thrice more and backed out, closing the door behind him. Sabirah watched him the while, and so he dared no instructional side looks to me or Ghadya.

Sabirah listened for the creak of Boulos’s feet upon the floorboards as he departed, then turned to the serving girl. “Leave us.”

“Mistress?”

Sabirah pointed to an archway on her right. The servant girl rose and left, with a backward glance at me. She worried, as did I, as to Sabirah's unseemly behavior.

"Sit, Captain. What? Do you fear my uncle believes me in love with both you *and* Dabir?"

"I worry as to your reputation and my head." I reluctantly settled onto the floor in front of the door.

"My uncle has told me that Dabir is to be sent away and that I am to be married soon. What do you think of that?"

"Eh. Congratulations, Mistress."

She scowled. "I am still in mourning."

Two years prior her marriage had been but a week off when the would-be groom died on the wrong end of a Greek lance. Sabirah had never met the fellow, but had expressed grief with great alacrity. The charade had been taken up by both Musa and Jaffar as an excuse to further the education the girls so craved, but everyone knew another marriage had been delayed too long. My own look at that moment must have conveyed my opinion on the matter, for she stared sharply at me. "What did you do?" she asked in a fierce whisper.

"Me?"

"This is all *your* doing!" Sabirah pointed menacingly at me. "Jaffar tells me that it was you who suggested Dabir accompany you to the market. What happened there? Uncle will not say!"

"I do not think—"

"Tell me, Captain!"

"If your uncle would not say, then it is not—"

"Did he forbid you from telling me?"

"Nay."

"Then I command it."

God had seen fit to heap troubles upon me that day. "Mistress," I said slowly, "it is not that simple, and you well know—"

"I command it, Captain. So help me—" She stood up from her cushion and began to pace in front of the window. "You do not want me for your enemy!"

"Indeed, nor do I wish to anger your uncle."

"Surely it would anger him to hear that you had not obeyed a command from me?"

I said nothing, and her eyes narrowed. She stood over me, glowering, while I considered my options.

"It is true that I suggested Dabir accompany us. The rest was but fate."

Bit by bit, pacing most of the while, she pried the story from me. My battle held little interest for her. Again and again she asked for details about the bowls and the fortune-telling.

"It is clear to me," I concluded, "that the magic woman confused the bowls."

"Is it?"

"Dabir is no monster slayer, and I am no writer."

"So you trust this woman to read your futures?"

"Well, I suppose so."

"So you believe that she is wise enough to foresee the plan of Allah, yet can become confused



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