

III

Madison was taken to the attic of a sheep barn, where a bed had been prepared for him. Exhausted from the journey, he slept until a little girl in an embroidered red vest and skirt, white blouse, and lace cap came to wake him. In broken Russian, she said, "Sir, you may come now for dinner."

An extended family had gathered around a long table in the main farmhouse. Three or four generations were represented, from the babies who slept in their mothers' laps to the ancient men who sat together at the table's head and received deferential attention. Madison was seated between two laborers with bushy black mustaches; he could see Marta five seats away, but she hardly looked at him. Madison's neighbors ate silently, although in general there was much boisterous conversation. Knowing no Armenian, Madison was lost, but he enjoyed the yogurt, lamb, rice, eggplant, and potent red wine that appeared before him.

The party ended rather abruptly, and Madison walked across the farmyard toward the barn. Moonlight illuminated icy mountains in every direction, and there was a sharp bite in the air. Madison recognized the universal smells of a farm in autumn: hay, smoke, and manure.

He heard Marta's voice behind him: "Be ready to leave very early tomorrow morning. You will ride in a truckload of aubergines to the vicinity of Mount Ararat. You'll have to make your way from there to Turkey. Then, if I were you, I'd turn myself into the American authorities in Ankara or Istanbul. You'll be all right after that. The Nazis don't know much about you, and they don't have a very good operation in America. We do, but Stalin wants excellent relations with your President Roosevelt, so he won't have you killed once you're home."

She wore a white embroidered blouse with puffy sleeves under a colorful vest. She had brushed her hair neatly and restrained it with a scarf. She stood in the shadows beneath the oversize eaves of the farmhouse.

"What about you?" Madison said.

"I'll go my own way."

As his eyes adjusted to the light, he could see her features better, especially her huge irises, which were exactly the color of

the sky. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"First, I'll find out what this Operation Arcana is all about. I still want to serve the Soviet Union. Then, when this monster Stalin falters, I'll help to topple him."

"Where will you start?"

"I'll decide that in the next few days."

Madison couldn't resist a smile. "You don't know, do you?"

She answered quickly and a little hotly: "Don't underestimate me. I'll figure it out."

"Come with me to America. You'll be safe there. You can defect and work for the good guys for a change."

"Oh, that's just what you'd like, isn't it? A trophy on your arm. 'Look, everyone, Marta used to be a communist spy, isn't it exciting.'"

Madison shook his head and began to protest, but Marta interrupted him. "I don't want to work for the Americans. No offense, Madison: you're very nice, very sympathetic to the suffering poor, but you're still a capitalist running dog."

"Why can't I help you?"

"Because you don't know what that means. It's going to be nasty. I'll have to kill -- or worse -- and I'll probably be killed myself. Look, it's not your sort of game. You don't even believe in the cause, as I see it, and you'd hate my methods. Go back to Berkeley. Give my regards to the girls in the front row of your lecture class."

He took a step toward her. "Marta, take me with you."

She backed away. "No. Good luck in Turkey." She stepped into the farmhouse and closed the door behind her. He stared at that door for a long time and almost knocked, but in the end he crossed the yard and went upstairs to bed.

Before dawn, the little girl awakened him again. He climbed down a ladder into a sheep pen and then walked out into the farmyard. Two ponies were harnessed to a covered cart. The little girl pointed into the back. Madison climbed in and picked his way over eggplants in the pitch darkness. The cart jolted into motion and then bumped its way down a mountain path in the pre-dawn darkness. Madison felt forlorn, but he distracted himself by thinking about how he could safely cross the Soviet border to Turkey.

After a minute or two, he heard someone say, "Do you still want to see Persia?"

"Marta!"

"Sshh. We'll have to jump out pretty soon and hike across the border. Then, if we're lucky, we can hitch a ride to Tabriz."

"Oh, Marta, thank you."

"Don't thank me. This isn't going to be a picnic."

The sun rose over the Caucasus. They came to a stop an hour or so later, and Madison heard the driver exchange words in Russian with another man. A soldier in Red Army uniform appeared at the back of the truck, but he only took a cursory look inside. As they moved away, Marta whispered, "A pack of American cigarettes got us through."

An hour later, the driver called out in Armenian. Marta grabbed Madison's arm and they clambered outside. They had stopped on a looping road high above the treeline. The ground was covered with boulders and gorse. They scrambled up with Marta leading the way; she now wore khakis and carried a leather satchel. When they reached the summit, they could see long ranges of snow-capped mountains in every direction. Marta made Madison squat, since a standing figure could be seen for miles. Behind them, to the north, the valleys were pale green; to the south, they were arid yellow. Marta pointed in front and said, "Persia." She stuck her thumb west and said, "That way to Turkey. This is your last chance. You can still walk to safety."

"No, thank you."

"Then let's get down this hill. When we find a road, we'll know we're in Persia."

"I think they're calling it 'Iran' now."

"It'll be the Iranian Soviet Socialist Republic before you know it."

A narrow stream ran down the bottom of the valley, but there was no road. They walked by the edge of the cold, clear water, heading upstream. The rocky landscape was trimmed here and there with pine bushes and mountain flowers. Marta, agile and quick, led the way. When the sides of the valley came together, they climbed a steep slope, grasping poplars and cypresses for traction. At the top, they saw that they had reached a higher valley. This one contained fewer boulders and more patchy grass. Two or three

miles away was a cluster of flat-roofed houses with arched windows. They hiked in that direction.

As they crossed the valley floor, they could see a speck of black moving rapidly in their direction. Distant barking told them what it was. Soon a black dog stood at a distance of twenty feet, snarling and tensing its body for a charge. Marta and Madison bumped against each other nervously. Marta drew her knife, and the dog focussed on the shiny blade. Just then, a man came into sight. He wore baggy trousers, a broad cummerbund, a fur jacket, a fierce mustache, and a little felt cap. In his arms he held a long hunting rifle. Marta whispered, "A Kurd." Then she called out in Arabic, "Salaam!"

The Kurd trained his gun on them and said hesitantly, "Peace. Who are you?"

Madison's Arabic was rusty, but he understood Marta's answer: "Christian travellers. We would like shelter and a guide."

The Kurd remained motionless, watching the two infidels. Finally, he said, "If you are friends, come in peace to my house." His Arabic was clear, if heavily accented.

"God bless you," said Marta, "the hospitality of the Kurdish people is legend. Thank God we did not encounter a lowland person -- some Persian."

Now the Kurd smiled: "There is no true hospitality outside the mountains. Come, you shall have all that my house can offer."

They learned on the way that the man's name was Tariq. He was a sheep farmer, but his older brother was the head of their household. Tariq was something of a traveler himself, having made the pilgrimage to Qum. He had met Englishmen before, so Madison claimed in broken Arabic that he had come from London. Marta said that she was Madison's wife, and Tariq was too tactful to mention the absence of a ring.

At Tariq's house, they were served boiled eggs, flat bread, and tea from a samovar. Veiled women and children watched silently as they ate.

"We want," Marta said, "to travel to Elburz. Could you take us there, perhaps on mules? We would have to pay you in rubles, I'm afraid, but we could give you this." She held up a wad of Soviet currency.

Tariq said, "I would take my honored visitors anywhere

between the Indus and the Tigris. But I have never heard of this Elburz."

"The Alamut River?" asked Madison, not wanting to risk conjugating an Arabic verb.

Now Tariq smiled: of course he knew the Alamut. "Two days' ride, no further," he said. "But this money -- Bolshevik currency is not worth as much as mud in Tabriz or even Yerevan."

"How much, then?" asked Marta.

He named a figure double what she had offered.

"Impossible," she said, "but we could give you this." She produced another fistful of bills and they shook on the deal. An hour later, they had mules and tents and were on their way. Tariq rode in front, followed by Marta and Madison. They ambled along mountain paths, noticing black nomads' tents and herds in the distance. Nearer at hand were thorny weeds and lavender bushes; pink blossoms coated the rocks like lichen. Not more than once an hour, they passed other travelers, often men with henna-dyed beards and sacks of rice strapped to their mules.

As they rode, Marta said in English, "What would the Nazis be doing in this part of the world?"

"Let me tell you a story," said Madison. "May I?"

"Of course."

She slowed her mule until Madison had pulled even, and then they rode in tandem behind Tariq. Madison began: "Once upon a time, there was a wood-merchant's son named Hassan-i-Sabah."

Marta laughed aloud at the fairytale beginning, but Madison continued, "Everyone thought that Hassan and his two best school friends were geniuses. One of these boys is still famous today as Omar-el-Khayyam, author of the lyric poems that we call the *Rubaiyat*. The other friend was named Abu-Ali-Hassan; he was destined for a distinguished political career. Hassan-i-Sabbah approached both boys one day and said, 'Everyone knows that at least one of us is going to be famous, rich, or powerful one day. But chance is capricious, and any man may run out of luck. Let's make a pact to improve our chances.'

"What pact do you have in mind?" said Abu-Ali.

"Hassan-i-Sabbah replied: 'Whosoever shall win power and glory first, he shall share it equally with the others.' So they went

their separate ways, and all but Hassan had forgotten the oath by the time Abu-Ali became Grand Vizier to the Caliph of Baghdad, who ruled a vast empire. This was around the year 1,000, and Baghdad was the greatest city on earth. Abu-Ali was the equivalent of prime minister in the world's most important nation. But fortune had not treated Hassan-i-Sabah as well, so he came to his old friend and said, 'Remember our pact? I must share equally in your fortune.'

"As a matter of fact, Abu-Ali had forgotten their arrangement, but he did his best to honor it. To Omar-el-Khayyam, he gave a small annual stipend so that the poet could write verse and study astronomy in peace. But Hassan-i-Sabbah wanted something else: power. Although Abu-Ali granted him various titles at court and promised him advancement, Hassan grew bitter at the slow pace of his progress and furious at the many courtiers who plotted to frustrate his ambitions.

"He left Baghdad for Cairo, where he joined a Shi'ite Moslem sect known as the Ismailis. The Ismailis were -- and are -- a perfectly respectable group, distinguished from other Moslems by their precise beliefs about the succession of authority after Mohammed's death. But in the tenth century, they had two addictions: hashish and secrecy. As an adept moved upward within the seven ranks of the initiated, he learned many mysteries, and presumably he had to pass tests and swear profound oaths. On one account, the Ismailis' mysteries were those of Moslem kabbalah. According to other historians, the inner circle of the sect learned only skepticism and rationalism. Certainly they were tolerant, for Ismaili caliphs turned Cairo into a meeting place for Christians, Jews, and Moslems -- probably the most interesting city in the world at the time. They also founded the world's first university, al-Azhar, where all manner of wisdom was shared.

"Hassan rose to the highest rank within the Ismaili grand lodge. He then traveled around the Moslem world, attracting a small but fanatically loyal band of followers. After several years of wandering, they marched into a desolate valley south of the Caspian Sea. There they found the impregnable castle of Alamut, built two hundred years earlier and known as the Eagle's Nest."

"Of course," said Marta. "Every castle in the Caucuses is called the Eagle's Nest."

"Oh," said Madison, slightly disappointed. "Well, this one deserved the title. Its foundation was 6,000 feet above sea level, and you could only reach it by marching up a narrow river gorge between cliffs that sometimes overhung the path. No one ever took it by force. Its very name, if written in Arabic without short vowels, meant 'death.' If you translated it into numbers, using kabbalah, you got the date when Hassan-i-Sabbah reached it: September 4, 1090. He said one word, and the incumbent master of Alamut fled with his family.

"From this remote castle, Hassan came to wield a sinister power. His method was assassination -- the very word derives either from his name or from the hashish that he gave his disciples to smoke. His men were famous for their grasp of foreign languages. They were also trained in various deadly arts; and some form of indoctrination, narcotic, or magic had made them utterly fearless. Anyone who denied Hassan's wishes could be struck dead, even inside a locked and guarded chamber three thousand miles from Alamut. If the assassin was caught, he would greet torture and execution with rapture. In some cases, it seemed impossible that any mortal man could have committed these murders.

"All across the Islamic world, from Cordoba, in Spain, to Mongolia, high officials fell to the Assassins' daggers. One of the first to die was Hassan's old classmate, Abu-Ali, who was still the Grand Vizier. When a Frenchman, William of Rubruck, reached the Mongol court, he found security measures of almost desperate rigor and complexity: passwords, locks, tasters, spies watching spies. Everyone slept in their armor. But nothing worked, and the political structures of Islam began to crumble.

"The new Caliph of Baghdad, Sinjar, marched to Alamut with an army and lay siege. One morning, he awoke to find a gold-handled dagger imbedded in the earth by his bed with a message instructing him to raise the siege and send envoys to Hassan -- if he valued his life. He withdrew his army and sent the envoys. Inside the castle, they were greeted by the Old Man himself, an emaciated, bearded figure with hypnotic eyes. Behind him stood ranks of Assassins in white cloaks with red headdresses and belts. Hassan ordered one of them to stab himself: he died immediately, with a smile on his face. Hassan told a few more to leap from the

ramparts; they complied. Before the envoys left, they caught a glimpse of the famous garden in which the Assassins rested between missions with hashish and courtesans, tasting the fruits of paradise. Marco Polo later wrote that this garden was the most beautiful in the world -- and very large, although it could be entered through only one door inside Hassan's castle."

Marta bobbed alongside on her mule. She said, "I take it the Nazis are excavating at Alamut?"

"I assume so," said Madison.

"And no one has dug there before?"

"My friend Freya Stark, a very intrepid English lady, told me that only a handful of Westerners have ever even seen the Alamut Valley, and one of those was Marco Polo. Miss Stark saw the place herself, but she didn't dig."

"What could the Nazis find there?"

"Well, the castle was destroyed in 1265 by a Mongol army under Mangu, the Great Khan. It wasn't captured by force. By now, the Assassins had shared some of their secrets, so they were a less fearsome bunch than before. Mangu took one of Hassan's successors hostage, and, to save his own life, this guy ordered all the Assassins' castles to surrender. As soon as they opened their gates, Mangu massacred everyone inside. However, the great Persian historian Juvaini was able to see the Alamut library before Mangu burned it. He recalled that it held a major collection of esoterica and secret wisdom, mostly heretical. The locals believe that some of the books remain inside the Rock of Alamut, guarded by six black dogs."

Marta said, "Six black dogs, eh? I was just starting to believe your stories. Is *any* of what you told me true?"

"Well, there are sources for most of it. But of course they're medieval, and you can't believe everything you read. One modern theory is that Hassan was just a religious reformer, perhaps a fundamentalist critic of wealth who led some kind of peasant revolt against the established clergy. He may even have created a primitive communist society in the Alamut Valley -- so perhaps *you* would have admired him. In that case, the rumors of black magic would be malicious libels. But all this is just modern speculation. The contemporary sources depict Hassan as power-mad. Just before he died, he's supposed to have said, 'Nothing is true;

everything is permitted.' So perhaps his secret wisdom was some form of nihilism. More likely, he was a student of the occult who had put together a Jewish-pagan-Moslem synthesis during his Cairo days."

Marta asked, "Did the Mongols wipe the Assassins off the face of the earth, or did some survive?"

"It looks as if the Assassins themselves were wiped out. However, Hassan-i-Sabbah had some influence on Europeans. He lived just when the crusaders were trying to recapture the Holy Land -- Hassan even murdered their king, Conrad of Jerusalem. They called him the 'Old Man of the Mountain,' and they were utterly fascinated by him. Their elite soldiers belonged to an equestrian order known as the Knights Templar. It seems that this group borrowed its structure from the Assassins; it too had a Grand Master, seven stages of initiation, and so on. At one point, some of the Assassins' castles even paid tribute to the Templars, which suggests close ties between these supposed enemies.

"In later years, the Templars gained an eerie reputation. They were a secretive and wealthy group, and they were thought to have acquired occult knowledge during their time in the East. The King of France persecuted them, killing their Grand Master and all the knights he could find and seizing their wealth. But, according to occultists, the Templars survived underground and took their revenge by instigating the French Revolution. Some Freemasons consider themselves modern Templars. In other words, wherever there are secret initiation rites, grand masters, lodges, and hints of kabbalah, there may be tenuous links to Hassan-i-Sabbah."

By dusk, they had ridden within sight of Qazvin. According to Tariq, this was a substantial town with a European-style Grand Hotel. But Madison and Marta had too little money for a room and no passports or other papers. They put their problem to Tariq.

"Money is unnecessary," he said, "for we can camp in the communal field. But if you have no papers, the Commandant will make trouble."

Marta asked, "Does he have to know that we're here?"

"Anyone who sees you will alert him, and he will come and drink tea with you and ask a lot of questions. He will want to search your bags and telegraph his superiors for instructions. If he doesn't like what he sees, he can detain you."

“Tariq,” said Marta, “I’m going to ask you a question. I can *make* papers that will satisfy this Commandant. Do you understand? They’re not authentic, but he will believe them. If I make such papers, will this worry you or give you offense?”

Tariq rode in silence for some time, and then asked, “Will the lady permit me to examine her papers first? If the Commandant does not accept them, he may arrest us all.”

“Of course,” said Marta. She stopped her mule, jumped to the ground, and opened her satchel. Out came various sheets of letterhead in diverse colors and alphabets -- some with heraldic shields at the top, others headed by the hammer-and-sickle or the swastika. She selected an elaborate sheet on which she scribbled a paragraph in ink and then applied a rubber stamp. She blew on her creation to dry it and handed it to Tariq. He was astounded and agreed to take them into town.

Qazvin was as large as Tariq had said, and it boasted several monumental buildings near the grassy central square: a castle, a large religious school, a Friday Mosque for major prayers, and a Royal Mosque, which was left over from the seventeenth century, when Qazvin had been the capital of Persia. The local architecture was elegant; blue cupolas, graceful minarets, and crenelated walls formed a picturesque skyline. The visitors decided to stop at the Grand Hotel for tea, thinking that this would reduce the Commandant’s suspicions, since they were supposed to be English. In fact, he arrived just as they had settled behind the daily newspapers. They sat on cane furniture in a lobby whose architecture, probably designed by a foreigner, resembled Hollywood’s notion of the Middle East. Ceiling fans turned slowly above potted palms, ottomans, and hanging rugs.

The Commandant said, “Good evening,” in Turkish, which seemed to be the most popular local language. Madison understood it reasonably well.

“Oh, hello,” he bellowed back in the King’s own English. “Are you the local constable? Thank goodness. We’ve had an awful mix-up and lost our luggage. Can one acquire a pair of European trousers in this town?”

A small, exclusively male crowd gathered to watch, and someone told the Commandant that the visitors were French. He asked them, “Avez-vous des permis pour voyager ici?”

"Oh, les permis," said Madison, using his worst French accent. "Oui, oui -- darling, show him that letter."

Marta produced the forgery, which the Commandant examined closely. Several by-standers attempted to read over his shoulder, but he fended them off.

"Bienvenus à Qazvin," he said, with a crisp bow. "Nous sommes honorés d'avoir ici les amis distingués du Shah. Une belle chambre va être préparée pour vous." With that, he hurried off to arrange a room.

Madison found the hotel's proprietor and said in English, "It's jolly embarrassing, but my wife and I are a bit short on funds. We've had a mix-up and lost our luggage. Most of our money's vanished too, although of course we could wire Teheran for more."

The proprietor, who spoke just a little English, explained the situation to the Commandant, who browbeat him into offering the visitors a free room. Madison tipped both men liberally, using American currency that he had hidden in his jacket pocket. He was left with \$25.

He and Marta were shown to a room that contained lacquered furniture, a painted screen, thick Persian carpets, and a double bed. "For you, madam," said Madison, placing Marta's satchel on the bed. "I'll sleep on those beautiful rugs."

"You and Tariq can have the bed."

Madison had forgotten about Tariq. "Don't be silly," he said, "we'll take the floor."

Marta made her case in a precise, firm tone: "There are two of you and one of me. The men can share the bed."

"I don't want to sleep with Tariq."

"Peasants are too dirty for you? Some people would think themselves lucky to spend one night in a bed like this, even if they had to share it."

"Fine," said Madison; "I don't want to argue about it. Let's go out and see if I can buy a change of clothes."

Marta stayed in the lobby while Tariq and Madison went shopping in the bazaar, a district covered by regular vaulted brick ceilings that were pierced every few feet by skylights. Most of the stores were now shut behind elaborate wooden doors; beggars swept away the detritus of the day's shopping. Madison found a tailor's shop, closed for the night, but Tariq located the tailor, who

agreed to make Madison some Western-style clothes by morning. Since the Shah had recently ordered every Iranian to dress like a European, the tailor was ready to produce creased trousers and Oxford shirts on demand. Madison realized with embarrassment that he would have to pay with dollars, even though Marta had told Tariq that they only had rubles. Fortunately, the Kurd was too polite to complain when he saw the money; he averted his eyes and pretended not to notice it at all. On the way back to the hotel, they spoke haltingly in Arabic about the beauty of the local architecture.

They found Marta sharing tea with a man in uniform.

"Darling," she said, "this lovely young man is a private in the German Army. We were just talking about his work here."

Madison introduced himself and shook hands while Tariq stood respectfully at a distance. Marta said to Madison: "Tell me again where we're going, darling. Hans knows the spot rather well."

"Alamut?" said Madison. "Do you know it?"

The soldier proudly nodded. "I am going there once every week," he said, working hard to produce an English sentence.

"Really? Is it worth a visit? The wife and I are touring -- you know, taking in the historic sites."

"Alamut is very historical. Vee are making a dig there."

"Jolly good," said Marta. "Are you an archaeologist, then?"

Hans looked sheepish. "I am just driving back and forth to Teheran."

"Still, that must be awfully exciting," Marta gushed. "Do you carry artifacts? Are they beautiful?"

"Just zacks," said Hans glumly. "And officers."

"Still, what good experience," Madison said, wondering what those sacks might contain. But before he and Marta could devise a plan to search his car, Hans had driven away toward Teheran.

When Tariq was invited to sleep in the fancy hotel room -- and with a foreign, married couple -- he was deeply embarrassed, but too curious to refuse. So they all slept comfortably enough in the Grand Hotel, and in the morning they set out for Alamut, once Madison had tried on his new pinstriped trousers and Edwardian-looking shirt.

In the plain around Qazvin, long lines of men scythed

wheat, and the many villages were shaded by willows and poplars. But the plain ended at one precise line, after which they ascended through barren valleys. As they passed the last farmhouse, nestled at the foot of the hills, Marta suggested that they buy some curds and bread for lunch. Tariq walked up an avenue of poplars to the farm, but returned a few minutes later, empty-handed. He shook his head and said, with evident disgust, "Lowlanders."

"They don't have any food to sell?" asked Madison, more confident now about his Arabic.

"I told them that I am guiding Englishmen into the hills. They won't do business with infidels. It was the man, really -- an old zealot. The girls would have *liked* to see you, I think."

Madison worried about riding into the mountains without food, but Tariq led them on unconcerned. After an hour, they met a small party of merchants, who were carrying rice from the wet lowlands near the Caspian. These men happily shared their fish and eggs, and the whole group lounged like picnickers under some scrubby trees. Crows cawed, insects buzzed, and at one point, a small airplane flew far overhead. Marta whispered, "A Messersmitt-109. No markings."

After lunch, Tariq led his party up a great, rock-strewn escarpment, using a winding path. At least they reached the summit and looked down into the Valley of the Alamut, which extended out of sight to the northeast. Beyond the valley, farther to the east, was a single black mountain, its upper reaches covered in snow. Madison pointed and asked Tariq, "What do they call that one?"

"Solomon's Throne," he said.

"I can see that it looks like a throne, with black arms and a white back -- but why Solomon's?"

Tariq explained, "When King Solomon married the Queen of Sheba, he could not make her love him." Tariq blushed when he realized that Marta was listening to his racy story, but he had to continue. "Solomon was an old man and the Queen was young, and she would not share his bed. He tried everything. Finally, he called all the birds of the air together, and asked them to find the coldest place on earth. So they dispersed to every land, and when each one returned, he claimed to have found the coldest spot. The hoopoe was the very last to return, and he said that he had found a

mountain so cold that his wings had frozen to the ground until the noon sun had thawed them.

“Right away, the King marched to that place with his whole court, including the Queen. As usual, they slept in separate beds, but it was so cold on top of the mountain that the poor Queen, who came from Africa, couldn’t stand it. In the middle of the night, she crept into her husband’s tent. When morning came, Solomon struck a rock and a warm spring came forth for her to bathe in. You can still see it if you climb Takht-i-Suleiman.”

They wound down the other side of the hill, and as they descended, the whole Alamut Valley disappeared again behind a second ridge. Tariq had to stop once to ask directions, for the path across the basalt hillside was lightly marked and tortuous. But ultimately they reached the top of the ridge and saw that the Alamut had cut a very narrow gully to their left. Tariq said, “If you do not know this path, you must wade up the river to enter the valley.”

Above them and to their right, a ruined castle sat on a conical hill. Madison guessed that Assassins had watched the valley from that point, signalling to Hassan whenever dangerous enemies approached. Below, the river snaked its way across the sandy valley, now pinched between black and red ridges, now broadening into olive-green oases. They descended to meet it, and then rode along its bank past several villages, where the peasants grew walnuts and sold rice pilau to travellers. Although poor, these people were far friendlier than the lowlanders -- so friendly, in fact, that at three in the afternoon, Madison, Marta, and Tariq sat gossiping with the whole village of Badasht. The men sat in a circle with long pipes; the women stood outside the ring, but spoke frequently. The villagers had many questions about England: whether the British respected the Persian Shah, whether everyone had motor cars, whether men were required to wear ties and jackets.

“We understand that there are Germans in this area,” said Marta, casually enough.

There was much nodding.

“Are they doing any digging?”

“Yes,” said one old man. “They pay villagers to do the hard work for them. That is where most of our boys are -- all but ‘Aziz

and Muhammad, who must watch the flocks."

Madison asked, "Where exactly are they working?"

Several men pointed beyond the village toward a grim, barren mountain.

"Could we ride up there and pay them a visit before nightfall?" asked Marta.

There was general agreement that this could be done, so Tariq and his party set out immediately. At first, their path followed the bank of the Alamut, which was now a raging mountain torrent. In places, the gorge was very narrow, and only a thin band of sky could be seen between the cliffs. They forded the stream and rode west up a steep path that took them 1,000 feet above the valley floor, switching back on itself frequently. Wherever there was soil instead of rock, grapes grew wild. As the shadows lengthened in the valley, they passed a band of young men who were heading down the mountain with shovels and pick-axes.

"How much further?" asked Tariq.

"Not much," said one of the men.

Another turn and they came upon a pair of soldiers -- Europeans who leapt to their feet in surprise at the sight of visitors.

"Achtung!" shouted one of them. "Wer sind Sie?"

"Good afternoon," said Madison, still feigning an English accent. "Not to worry; we just want to have a peek at your dig."

One of the soldiers kept his rifle trained on the strangers while the other ran up the hill. When he returned, he beckoned for them to follow. Marta, Madison, and Tariq rode behind the sentries until they reached the flat summit of the mountain, where six tents and a wooden shed had been built among low stone ruins. Ropes and ladders led down the opposite face of the mountain, where most of the digging seemed to be concentrated.

A man approached, wearing a black uniform with a leather jacket over his shoulders. He had an unusual gait, and Madison soon realized that this was because he had lost an arm and his left leg was stiff. Still, he moved briskly toward them. He was about forty, with thick black hair and high cheekbones. He gave a Nazi salute -- revealing a swastika armband -- and said, "Heil Hitler. Ich heisse Oberlieutenant Breuer."

"I say, do you speak any English?" asked Madison.

"English, yes, of course."

"Oh, good. My wife and I, we're touring the region and we wanted to examine the Assassins' castle. Is this it?"

"Yes, this is Alamut."

"Fabulous. Would you be so kind as to give us a tour?"

"A tour?" He looked discomfited.

"You know, a little look around; tell us where the Old Man of the Mountain had his digs, and all that."

"Very well, a tour. You can see that we are conducting an excavation here." Breuer gestured impatiently toward the low ruins. "Where you stand would have been the main defense of Hassan's castle; the living quarters are cut into the western face of the hill. An enemy could only reach that area by storming the main citadel, which no one ever achieved."

He led them past tan tents toward the rim of the mountain. "Down there," he said, "were the private rooms, the famous gardens, and so on."

"May we have a look?" said Marta, doing a passable imitation of an English accent.

"Unfortunately, no."

The German and his visitors stared at one another for some time. Finally, Madison said, "Oh, well, that's a shame. I say, you look like a military chap. Is there an actual archaeologist on the site?"

"I am, of course, Professor of Semitic Languages and History, University of Heidelberg. But I am not the chief archaeologist here."

"Who's that?" asked Marta.

Again, Breuer looked perturbed. "Unfortunately, the Director is not available at this time."

Madison decided that this was just as well, since a professional archaeologist might recognize him. But just then Breuer gave another Nazi salute. Madison and Marta turned to see a small man dressed rather dapperly in a grey waistcoat and pleated trousers. He wore a clipped, grey beard and long hair, which was tied back neatly in a ponytail. In one hand, he held a black, silver-tipped cane. In an indeterminate European accent, he said, "Here I am now, as a matter of fact."

He took Marta's hand and kissed it, then shook Madison's.

Breuer said, "May I present der Graf von Sanktus-Germanus."

"Count," said Madison, surprised by the title, "I'm Jonathan Mills. And this is my wife, Nina."

"Charmed," said the Count. "I hope the Oberlieutenant has been hospitable?"

"Very much so," said Marta, returning his smile.

"Can you stay the night? It is a long ride back to Badasht, and difficult after dark."

Madison looked at Marta, who shook her head and replied, "Thank you, but we won't overstay our welcome. However, just before we leave, could you show us any of your treasures?"

The Count smiled again. "The lady knows, I'm sure, that much of what one finds on an archaeological site is rather dull: soil discoloration, potsherds, ashes. This one is no exception."

"You haven't turned up any curios from the Assassins' days?" asked Madison.

"Just pottery fragments, I'm afraid."

Madison tried another question: "Could we take a look at the actual excavation work -- I mean, down the west face of the mountain?"

"It's just more soil strata and boxes of pottery fragments," said the Count; "rather boring. And it can be dangerous, climbing down there. I don't go much myself." He laughed.

"Well, it's been lovely seeing this place," said Marta: "very romantic. Darling, we should be going."

"The way will be dark," said the Count. "A detail of soldiers with lights will accompany you to Badasht."

"You are too kind," said Madison, "but we can manage on our own."

"I insist. Oberlieutenant, find two good men. They can stay overnight in the village and return in the morning with the workers."

Breuer said, "Heil Hitler," and left in search of soldiers. He returned with the two sentries from the mountain path, who now carried hurricane lanterns. "These men will see that you reach Badasht safely," said the Count.

So a party of five wound its way down the mountain: two German soldiers leading the way on foot, Madison and Marta following Tariq on their mules. When they were out of sight of the

excavation, Marta whispered to Madison, "Shall I kill them?"

Because he didn't want the two boys to die, Madison said, "No. Their officers will be expecting them to radio from Badasht. Let's go there with them, then leave Tariq and sneak up to the site on foot."

"All right," whispered Marta, "but if they try to attack us, they're dead."

It was after midnight when they reached the village, and it took an hour or more to negotiate rooms for everyone. The Germans waited in the courtyard, their cigarettes glowing in the dark, while Madison and Marta pretended to go to bed. But soon Marta slipped into Tariq's room and explained their plan. She also paid him his fee so that he could leave if they had not returned by morning; and she borrowed two paraffin lamps and a coil of rope from their host. Then she and Madison slipped out a back window and began the hike up the mountain.

It was a clear night; they found their way easily without the lamps. They walked mostly in silence, perhaps quieted by nervous anticipation and the night chill. When they neared the summit, they left the trail and edged their way around the perimeter of the German encampment. Marta pointed out the sentries one by one, so that they could be avoided. Two guards had been assigned to watch the ladder that led from the summit down the west face of the mountain. Marta drew her knife, but Madison stopped her with a hand on her wrist. "This is better," he said, drawing his blow gun.

They crept toward the soldiers, who crouched with cigarettes and submachine guns on a wooden platform overlooking the mountain face. Madison worked his way behind them and fired a first dart. One soldier tipped over wordlessly. Just as his companion noticed what had happened, he too sank to the ground.

Marta and Madison climbed silently down the ladder until they reached a wooden scaffold, apparently one of many layers built against the mountain face. Far below them was a hollow, completely surrounded by high mountains. Madison guessed that Hassan's gardens had been built in that basin -- perhaps watered by a spring -- and that the only entrance to the whole area was through the castle.

The first level of scaffolding seemed uninteresting, so they crept down another ladder. All around them they saw surveying

tools, trowels, sample boxes, and wheelbarrows. A complex system of pulleys had been designed to carry buckets of earth toward the mountain top.

They descended yet another layer, walked along the scaffolding, and found a pitch-black opening in the rock. "Shall we?" said Madison.

They stepped inside, and Marta carefully lit her lamp. They now stood in a stone passageway, which turned right after ten feet and then ran parallel to the hill face. They walked until they reached a modern door, on which a sign -- printed in Gothic characters over a skull-and-cross-bones device -- announced, "Eingang strenglich verboten." There was also a heavy padlock.

"Hold these," said Marta, giving Madison her lamp. He held it nearby as she slowly dismantled the lock, using tools from her satchel. They opened the door, entered, and closed it behind them, finding themselves in a small stone room with a window slit to their right. Madison looked through the window and saw scaffolding and buckets silhouetted against the night sky.

On the opposite wall from the window, there was a door -- this one possibly medieval. Marta opened the iron latch and they stepped into a tunnel, which had been carved like a catacomb directly into the rock. It descended steeply and then seemed to end in a void. Madison lowered their lamp into the darkness, seeing that there was a new floor about a man's height below. There did not seem to be any place to secure their rope, so they took it with them and jumped. When Madison landed, everything seemed normal, but when Marta joined him, the earth gave way and they crashed through sand and brittle wood to the level beneath.

Madison was hurt in several places from his fall. The lamp had gone out, so he lay in absolute darkness. "Are you all right?" he muttered, wincing.

"Pretty much," said Marta, somewhere to his left.

Just as she spoke, they heard a fearsome snarl, much panting, and the sound of paws scratching on stone. Madison rolled instinctively into a ball and reached for his blow dart, but not before a jaw had snapped shut around his ankle. Teeth ripped the skin and gripped the bone. Madison let out a roar of pain and tried to stab the beast with a dart, but another jaw closed around his shirt cuff, just missing his wrist. In every direction there was

muscular flesh, fangs, claws, and endless, frantic breathing.

Madison struggled to stab the creature that was biting his wrist, while another continued to wrestle with his ankle. "Marta?" he shouted, but he couldn't distinguish an answer amid all the noise. He heard human cries, but they could have been his own. Just as he thought that he could release his hand, a third set of teeth caught hold of his trouser leg and pulled him to the ground. Now there were several panting mouths above him.

The room lit up as a loud blast interrupted the snarling. For an instant after the light had vanished, the image of a long black mouth was frozen on Madison's retina. He decoded it slowly, deciding that what he had seen was a Doberman pincer, preparing to maul his face. But after the blast, he felt the dogs withdraw somewhat. He heard a second explosion, saw another flash of light, and a Doberman howled. Then Marta lit a match and held it up to reveal the hindquarters of three dogs disappearing down a tunnel. Two more lay bleeding on the floor. Marta had a wild look in her eye, as blood poured down her right forearm. In her left hand, she waved a pistol.

"Are you hurt?" he said.

"Not too badly; just my ankle." Madison struggled to his feet and winced as he felt the wound. "How about you?"

"It's nothing," said Marta, ripping her shirt sleeve and tying the scrap into a bandage. "Can I treat your leg? I have medical supplies in my satchel."

"In a few minutes," said Madison. "Right now, we'd better get out of here. I'm sure the Germans could hear that gun."

Marta thought as she re-lit their lamp. "I have a suspicion that we're going to be captured," she said. "It would be a shame not to take a look around first."

"All right." Madison hobbled after Marta as she walked up the corridor behind the vanished dogs. Glowing eyes appeared just outside the radius of the lamplight, but the animals backed away as Marta approached.

On the right was another door, this one ajar. They stepped inside and closed it behind them, finding themselves in a large room whose stone walls had been cut into shelves, on which were stacked books and scrolls. Beneath a bare bulb, a modern steel table supported an elaborate machine. Marta examined it, seeing two

metal drums connected by a mesh of hair-thin wires.

Madison explained: "That's for unravelling scrolls that have turned brittle with age."

One parchment had been partly unrolled, so that thousands of separate pieces now lay like a completed puzzle on the table top. Madison was surprised to see a long series of pictographs -- no two the same, and none familiar to him. A camera, held in a heavy brace, had been positioned so that it could photograph the scroll, section by section. Madison rewound the film, removed it, and slipped it into his pocket.

When Marta re-opened the door, eyes and fangs appeared in the crack, but she shooed the dogs away with her gun. Then she and Madison proceeded down the hall to the next room. This seemed to be equipped for developing film; there were bottled chemicals, trays, and enlarging equipment arrayed on a steel table. The walls, however, were ancient and subtly decorated with an arabesque bas-relief frieze near the ceiling.

Madison found an empty canvas sack on the ground and showed the tag to Marta. She said, "German diplomatic pouch. They probably send the prints to their embassy in Teheran, then ship them home through diplomatic channels."

They left the darkroom and followed the corridor to its end: a bare room with another narrow window. Madison looked outside but could see only a slice of night sky. He listened, then whispered, "I hear boots on the scaffolding."

"Can you squeeze through?" Marta asked from behind him.

"I don't think so." He backed away from the window, whispering, "Here they come."

Several soldiers stomped past on the scaffolding, not three feet from Madison's face. A dog could be heard panting and whimpering outside. The men entered the cave complex.

"We only have seconds," said Marta. "Get your body through that opening."

Madison stuck his head outside, turned his shoulders, and pressed not very forcefully against the stone sides. Just as he was about to give up, Marta delivered a powerful blow from behind, jamming his torso into the window. "Get through," she said through gritted teeth.

"Push me again."

She backed up several paces, ran toward him, and slammed her shoulder into his rear. He fell outside, bleeding on both of his arms. Marta stepped through behind him.

Above, more boots were thumping down ladders. Madison noticed that a bucket hung from a rope not far from where they stood. Simultaneously, he and Marta looked at the bucket, at another rope that hung near it, and at a heavy drilling machine that sat on the scaffold. With the same idea in mind, they both held tightly to the bucket. Then Marta tied the other end of the rope to the drilling machine, which they pushed until it tumbled over the edge into the black abyss. The rope that held their bucket tightened, then yanked them off their feet and into the sky. They soared past three stories of scaffolding and slammed into a pulley at summit-level. The whole apparatus shuddered and began to sag as the drilling machine pulled on the rope far below.

Marta and Madison now hung a yard or two from the edge of the mountain, with nearly a mile of air between their feet and the valley floor. Madison reached up and found the brace that supported the pulley above his head. He used it to swing his way toward solid ground. Marta threw her satchel onto the mountain top and followed him. As they jumped onto the ground, the brace gave way from the shock and disappeared into the void.

They hurried through the German encampment, which seemed to be largely deserted. Madison was having great difficulty running. He noticed a motorcycle parked near a tent and hobbled over to it. After Marta climbed on behind him, he started the motor with a kick. As they began to move, a man emerged from a tent. He stood in deep shadow, but they could see him tip his hat to reveal a grey ponytail. "À bientôt," he said, "and bon voyage. We will see each other again."

They roared down the mountain trail. Marta grasped Madison around the waist and turned so that she could fire backward with her pistol if necessary. Her knee dug into Madison's thigh, surprising him with its smallness. He steered with one hand and held her arm against him with the other. He noticed that she was bleeding lightly through her bandage.

They bumped along at about ten miles an hour; and after a while, Madison cut his headlight and reduced speed even further so that they would not be noticed. At this rate, they reached

Badasht as the sun began to brighten the highest hills of the Alamut. They climbed off the motorcycle and approached the village on foot, circling it cautiously. When they were still half a mile away, Marta stopped Madison. "One guard," she said, pointing at a cypress grove. Then she counted two, three, four, and five more Germans, all hidden within one hundred yards of Badasht.

"We'd better just get out of here," said Madison.

"Right. North or south?"

Madison suggested, "South to Teheran?"

"That place is crawling with Nazis and Soviets. Why would we go there?"

"To follow those sacks full of film."

"Impossible," said Marta. "Security at the German embassy will be excellent. We can't just browse through their diplomatic pouches."

"Where to, then?"

"How about Istanbul? We can get fake passports and money there, and head into Europe."

"Good enough."

They retrieved the motorcycle and roared north along the bank of the Alamut. Although they expected an ambush, none materialized, perhaps because they had the fastest means of transportation in the valley. The landscape grew gradually flatter and less arid as they moved toward the swampy plain of the Caspian, which had served as a natural barrier in Hassan's day. Just as the valley began to peter out and the stream widened into a stagnant river, Marta pointed at the sky behind them.

A seaplane approached at about 10,000 feet. Madison first tried to outrun it, but the airplane gained on them steadily, losing altitude in the process. As it grew large in Madison's mirror, Marta pounded on his shoulder.

"Let's find cover!" she shouted.

They skidded to a halt and ran toward a rock, just as machine gun bullets began to whip up the dust behind them. They leapt onto the ground behind the boulder while the plane passed overhead, its huge hull casting a wide shadow.

On its second pass, the airplane sprayed machine-gun fire at their motorcycle, which looked badly damaged. When the plane

was directly overhead on its third loop, something emerged from a window on one side. A large, floppy, black object plummeted to earth. As the plane became a buzzing speck in the distance, Madison and Marta emerged from their rock to examine this object. It was the body of a man, trussed in several places with rope. He had fallen on his stomach, and a gold handle protruded from his back. Marta pulled it out, revealing a richly-decorated and murderously hooked dagger, dripping blood.

"It looks medieval," said Madison, noticing silver Arabic calligraphy on the handle.

"There's a note attached to it." Marta handed it to Madison, who read in English: "Return the film and mind your own business. S.-G."

Marta turned the man over by his shoulder. His face was bloody in several places and he seemed to have been badly beaten. Indeed, there was so much blood on his body that he was not easy to recognize, but they both knew right away that he was Tariq.

IV

Marta and Madison watched Europe approach from the bow of the Istanbul ferry. Behind them was Üsküdar, a suburb on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. Ahead, the city arose from its grey waters: a rolling peninsula, ringed with ancient sea walls, jammed with crooked houses, and studded with broad domes and lofty minarets. As the ferry turned into the bustling Golden Horn, Madison murmured, "And therefore I have sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium."

"You mean, you took the ferry to Istanbul." Although Marta knew the city well, it made her uneasy and irritable. Armenians have bad memories of Constantinople.

They disembarked in the quarter of the fish markets, shocked by the noisy crowds. Marta shouted: "We'll go first to this hotel of yours; see if they'll really take us without passports."

Madison had a favorite place to stay in Istanbul, a small establishment below the Blue Mosque. They walked there, ascending the Greek acropolis through narrow streets. The upper stories of the half-timbered houses overhung the unpaved roads, and chimneys stuck out of walls like corncob pipes. Every street curved; most only ran for a block or so. It was as if the roads were just the crooked spaces left over when thousands of rickety buildings were set down in clumps between the Byzantine walls.

They knocked on a polished wooden door and a young woman admitted them to a cozy lobby, furnished with carpets, oil lamps, and low seats that ran along every wall. The proprietor emerged and greeted Madison warmly in Turkish: "My old friend, Dr. Brown, the crazy American professor! You have been away too long."

"Evilya," said Madison, "how's business? Can you give us two rooms -- and wait until Thursday for our money and passports? I'm in one of my usual scrapes."

Evilya winked. "I could wait a month of Thursdays. Come, you shall both have balcony rooms overlooking the water. Lunch is served at one."

Madison's room was furnished in the Ottoman style, with lacquered furniture and rugs. He opened heavy shutters to reveal sky, water, and sea gulls. Stepping onto the balcony, he inhaled the