## Child of an Ancient City

## Tad Williams

“Merciful Allah! I am as a calf, fatted for slaughter!” Masrur al-Adan roared with laughter and crashed his goblet down on the polished wood table—once, twice, thrice. A trail of crescent-shaped dents followed his hand. “I can scarce move for gorging.”

The fire was banked, and shadows walked the walls. Masrur’s table— for he was master here—stood scatterspread with the bones of small fowl.

Masrur leaned forward and squinted across the table. “A calf,” he said. “Fatted.” He belched absently and wiped his mouth with wine-stained sleeve.

Ibn Fahad broke off a thin, cold smile. “We have indeed wreaked massacre on the race of pigeons, old friend.” His slim hand swept above the littered table-top. “We have also put the elite guard of your wine cellars to flight. And, as usual, I thank you for your hospitality. But do you not sometimes wonder if there is more to life than growing fat in the service of the Caliph?”

“Hah!” Masrur goggled his eyes. “Doing the Caliph’s bidding has made me wealthy. I have made myself fat.” He smiled. The other guests laughed and whispered.

Abu Jamir, a fatter man in an equally stained robe, toppled a small tower erected from the bones of squab. “The night is young, good Masrur!” he cried. “Have someone fetch up more wine and let us hear some stories!”

“Baba!” Masrur bellowed. “Come here, you old dog!” Within three breaths an old servant stood in the doorway, looking to his sportive master with apprehension.

“Bring us the rest of the wine, Baba—or have you drunk it all?”

Baba pulled at his grizzled chin. “Ah...ah, but you drank it, Master. You and Master Ibn Fahad took the last four jars with you when you went to shoot arrows at the weathercock.”

“Just as I suspected,” Masrur nodded. “Well, get on across the bazaar to Abu Jamir’s place, wake up his manservant, and bring back several jugs. The good Jamir says we must have it now.”

Baba disappeared. The chagrined Abu Jamir was cheerfully back-thumped by the other guests.

“A story, a story!” someone shouted. “A tale!”

“Oh, yes, a tale of your travels, Master Masrur!” This was young Hassan, sinfully drunk. No one minded. His eyes were bright, and he was full of innocent stupidity. “Someone said you have traveled to the green lands of the north.”

“The north...?” Masrur grumbled, waving his hand as though confronted with something unclean. “No, lad, no...that I cannot give to you.” His face clouded and he slumped back on his cushions; his tarbooshed head swayed.

Ibn Fahad knew Masrur like he knew his horses—indeed, Masrur was the only human that could claim so much of Ibn Fahad’s attention. He had seen his old comrade drink twice this quantity and still dance like a dervish on the walls of Baghdad, but he thought he could guess the reason for this sudden incapacity.

“Oh, Masrur, please!” Hassan had not given up; he was as unshakeable as a young falcon with its first prey beneath its talons. “Tell us of the north. Tell us of the infidels!”

“A good Moslem should not show such interest in unbelievers.” Abu Jamir sniffed piously, shaking the last drops from a wine jug. “If Masrur does not wish to tell a tale, let him be.”

“Hah!” snorted the host, recovering somewhat. “You only seek to stall me, Jamir, so that my throat shall not be so dry when your wine arrives. No, I have no fear of speaking of unbelievers: Allah would not have given them a place in the world for their own if they had not some use. Rather it is...certain other things that happened which make me hesitate.” He gazed kindly on young Hassan, who in the depths of his drunkenness looked about to cry. “Do not despair, eggling. Perhaps it would do me good to unfold this story. I have kept the details long inside.” He emptied the dregs of another jar into his cup. “I still feel it so strongly, though—bitter, bitter times. Why don’t you tell the story, my good friend?” he said over his shoulder to Ibn Fahad. “You played as much a part as did I.”

“No,” Ibn Fahad replied. Drunken puppy Hassan emitted a strangled cry of despair.

“But why, old comrade?” Masrur asked, pivoting his bulk to stare in amazement. “Did the experience so chill even your heart?”

Ibn Fahad glowered. “Because I know better. As soon as I start you will interrupt, adding details here, magnifying there, then saying: ‘No, no, I cannot speak of it! Continue, old friend!’ Before I have taken another breath you will interrupt me again. You know you will wind up doing all the talking, Masrur. Why do you not start from the beginning and save me my breath?”

All laughed but Masrur, who put on a look of wounded solicitousness. “Of course, old friend,” he murmured. “I had no idea that you harbored such grievances. Of course I shall tell the tale.” A broad wink was offered to the table. “No sacrifice is too great for a friendship such as ours. Poke up the fire, will you, Baba? Ah, he’s gone. Hassan, will you be so kind?”

When the youth was again seated Masrur took a swallow, stroked his beard, and began.

In those days [Masrur said], I myself was but a lowly soldier in the service of Harun al-Rashid, may Allah grant him health. I was young, strong, a man who loved wine more than he should—but what soldier does not?—and a good deal more trim and comely than you see me today.

My troop received a commission to accompany a caravan going north, bound for the land of the Armenites beyond the Caucassian Mountains. A certain prince of that people had sent a great store of gifts as tribute to the Caliph, inviting him to open a route for trade between his principality and our caliphate. Harun al-Rashid, wisest of wise men that he is, did not exactly make the camels groan beneath the weight of the gifts that he sent in return; but he sent several courtiers, including the under-vizier Walid al-Salameh, to speak for him and to assure this Armenite prince that rich rewards would follow when the route over the Caucassians was opened for good.

We left Baghdad in grand style, pennants flying, the shields of the soldiers flashing like golden dinars, and the Caliph’s gifts bundled onto the backs of a gang of evil, contrary donkeys.

We followed the banks of the faithful Tigris, resting several days at Mosul, then continued through the eastern edge of Anatolia. Already as we mounted northward the land was beginning to change, the clean sands giving way to rocky hills and scrub. The weather was colder, and the skies gray, as though Allah’s face was turned away from that country, but the men were not unhappy to be out from under the desert sun. Our pace was good; there was not a hint of danger except the occasional wolf howling at night beyond the circles of the campfires. Before two months had passed we had reached the foothills of the Caucassians—what is called the steppe country.

For those of you who have not strayed far from our Baghdad, I should tell you that the northern lands are like nothing you have seen. The trees there grow so close together you could not throw a stone five paces without striking one. The land itself seems always dark—the trees mask the sun before the afternoon is properly finished—and the ground is damp. But, in truth, the novelty of it fades quickly, and before long it seems that the smell of decay is always with you. We caravaneers had been over eight weeks a-traveling, and the bite of homesickness was strong, but we contented ourselves with the thought of the accommodations that would be ours when we reached the palace of the prince, laden as we were with our Caliph’s good wishes—and the tangible proof thereof.

We had just crossed the high mountain passes and begun our journey down when disaster struck.

We were encamped one night in a box canyon, a thousand steep feet below the summit of the tall Caucassian peaks. The fires were not much but glowing coals, and nearly all the camp was asleep except for two men standing sentry. I was wrapped in my bedroll, dreaming of how I would spend my earnings, when a terrible shriek awakened me. Sitting groggily upright, I was promptly knocked down by some bulky thing tumbling onto me. A moment’s horrified examination showed that it was one of the sentries, throat pierced with an arrow, eyes bulging with his final surprise. Suddenly there was a chorus of howls from the hillside above. All I could think of was wolves, that the wolves were coming down on us; in my witless state I could make no sense of the arrow at all.

Even as the others sprang up around me the camp was suddenly filled with leaping, whooping shadows. Another arrow hissed past my face in the darkness, and then something crashed against my bare head, filling the nighttime with a great splash of light that illuminated nothing. I fell back, insensible.

I could not tell how long I had journeyed in that deeper darkness when I was finally roused by a sharp boot prodding at my ribcage.

I looked up at a tall, cruel figure, cast by the cloud-curtained morning sun in bold silhouette. As my sight adjusted I saw a knife-thin face, dark-browed and fierce, with mustachios long as a Tartar herdsman’s. I felt sure that whoever had struck me had returned to finish the job, and I struggled weakly to pull my dagger from my sash. This terrifying figure merely lifted one of his pointy boots and trod delicately on my wrist, saying in perfect Arabic: “Wonders of Allah, this is the dirtiest man I have ever seen.”

It was Ibn Fahad, of course. The caravan had been of good size, and he had been riding with the Armenite and the under-vizier—not back with the hoi polloi—so we had never spoken. Now you see how we first truly met: me on my back, covered with mud, blood, and spit; and Ibn Fahad standing over me like a rich man examining carrots in the bazaar. Infamy!

Ibn Fahad had been blessed with what I would come later to know as his usual luck. When the bandits—who must have been following us for some days—came down upon us in the night, Ibn Fahad had been voiding his bladder some way downslope. Running back at the sound of the first cries, he had sent more than a few mountain bandits down to Hell courtesy of his swift sword, but they were too many. He pulled together a small group of survivors from the main party and they fought their way free, then fled along the mountain in the darkness listening to the screams echoing behind them, cursing their small numbers and ignorance of the country.

Coming back in the light of day to scavenge for supplies, as well as ascertain the nature of our attackers, Ibn Fahad had found me—a fact he has never allowed me to forget, and for which I have never allowed him to evade responsibility.

While my wounds and bandit-spites were doctored, Ibn Fahad introduced me to the few survivors of our once-great caravan.

One was Susri al-Din—a cheerful lad, fresh-faced and smooth-cheeked as young Hassan here, dressed in the robes of a rich merchant’s son. The soldiers who had survived rather liked him, and called him “Fawn,” to tease him for his wide-eyed good looks. There was a skinny wretch of a chief clerk named Abdallah, purse-mouthed and iron-eyed, and an indecently plump young mullah, who had just left the madrasa and was getting a rather rude introduction to life outside the seminary. Ruad, the mullah, looked as though he would prefer to be drinking and laughing with the soldiers—beside myself and Ibn Fahad there were four or five more of these—while Abdallah the prim-faced clerk looked as though he should be the one who never lifted his head out of the Koran. Well, in a way that was true, since for a man like Abdallah the balance book is the Holy Book, may Allah forgive such blasphemy.

There was one other, notable for the extreme richness of his robes, the extreme whiteness of his beard, and the vast weight of his personal jewelry—Walid al-Salameh, the under-vizier to His Eminence the Caliph Harun al-Rashid. Walid was the most important man of the whole party. He was also, surprisingly, not a bad fellow at all.

So there we found ourselves, the wrack of the caliph’s embassy, with no hope but to try and find our way back home through a strange, hostile land.

The upper reaches of the Caucassians are a cold and godless place. The fog is thick and wet; it crawls in of the morning, leaves briefly at the time the sun is high, then comes creeping back long before sunset. We had been sodden as well-diggers from the moment we had stepped into the foothills. A treacherous place, those mountains: home of bear and wolf, covered in forest so thick that in places the sun was lost completely. Since we had no guide—indeed, it was several days before we saw any sign of inhabitants whatsoever—we wandered unsteered, losing half as much ground as we gained for walking in circles.

At last we were forced to admit our need for a trained local eye. In the middle slopes the trees grew so thick that fixing our direction was impossible for hours at a time. We were divining the location of Mecca by general discussion, and—blasphemy again—we probably spent as much time praying toward Aleppo as to Mecca. It seemed a choice between possible discovery and certain doom.

We came down by night and took a young man out of an isolated shepherd’s hovel, as quietly as ex-brigands like ourselves (or at least like many of us, Ibn Fahad. My apologies!) could. The family did not wake, the dog did not bark; we were two leagues away before sunrise, I’m sure.

I felt sorry in a way for the young peasant-lout we’d kidnapped. He was a nice fellow, although fearfully stupid—I wonder if we are now an old, dull story with which he bores his children? In any case, once this young rustic—whose name as far as I could tell was unpronounceable by civilized tongues—realized that we were not ghosts or Jinni, and were not going to kill him on the spot, he calmed down and was quite useful. We began to make real progress, reaching the peak of the nearest ridge in two days.

There was a slight feeling of celebration in the air that night, our first in days under the open skies. The soldiers cursed the lack of strong drink, but spirits were good nonetheless—even Ibn Fahad pried loose a smile.

As the under-vizier Walid told a humorous story, I looked about the camp. There were but two grim faces: the clerk Abdallah—which was to be expected, since he seemed a patently sour old devil—and the stolen peasant-boy. I walked over to him.

“Ho, young one,” I said, “why do you look so downcast? Have you not realized that we are good-hearted, Godfearing men, and will not harm you?” He did not even raise his chin, which rested on his knees, shepherd-style, but he turned his eyes up to mine.

“It is not those things,” he said in his awkward Arabic. “It is not you soldiers but...this place.”

“Gloomy mountains they are indeed,” I agreed, “but you have lived here all your young life. Why should it bother you?”

“Not this place. We never come here—it is unholy. The vampyr walks these peaks.”

“Vampyr?” said I. “And what peasant-devil is that?”

He would say no more; I left him to his brooding and walked back to the fire.

The men all had a good laugh over the vampyr, making jesting guesses as to what type of beast it might be, but Ruad, the young mullah, waved his hands urgently.

“I have heard of such afreets,” he said. “They are not to be laughed at by such a godless lot as yourselves.”

He said this as a sort of scolding joke, but he wore a strange look on his round face; we listened with interest as he continued.

“The vampyr is a restless spirit. It is neither alive nor dead, and Shaitan possesses its soul utterly. It sleeps in a sepulcher by day, and when the moon rises it goes out to feed upon travelers, to drink their blood.”

Some of the men again laughed loudly, but this time it rang false as a brassmerchant’s smile.

“I have heard of these from one of our foreign visitors,” said the under-vizier Walid quietly. “He told me of a plague of these vampyr in a village near Smyrna. All the inhabitants fled, and the village is still uninhabited today.”

This reminded someone else (myself, perhaps) of a tale about an afreet with teeth growing on both sides of his head. Others followed with their own demon stories. The talk went on late into the night, and no one left the campfire until it had completely burned out.

By noon the next day we had left the heights and were passing back down into the dark, tree-blanketed ravines. When we stopped that night we were once more hidden from the stars, out of sight of Allah and the sky.

I remember waking up in the foredawn hours. My beard was wet with dew, and I was damnably tangled up in my cloak. A great, dark shape stood over me. I must confess to making a bit of a squawking noise.

“It’s me,” the shape hissed—it was Rifakh, one of the other soldiers.

“You gave me a turn.”

Rifakh chuckled. “Thought I was that vamper, eh? Sorry. Just stepping out for a piss.” He stepped over me, and I heard him trampling the underbrush. I slipped back into sleep.

The sun was just barely over the horizon when I was again awakened, this time by Ibn Fahad tugging at my arm. I grumbled at him to leave me alone, but he had a grip on me like an alms-beggar.

“Rifakh’s gone,” he said. “Wake up. Have you seen him?”

“He walked on me in the middle of the night, on his way to go moisten a tree,” I said. “He probably fell in the darkness and hit his head on something—have you looked?”

“Several times,” Ibn Fahad responded. “All around the camp. No sign of him. Did he say anything to you?”

“Nothing interesting. Perhaps he has met the sister of our shepherd-boy, and is making the two-backed beast.”

Ibn Fahad made a sour face at my crudity. “Perhaps not. Perhaps he has met some other beast.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “If he hasn’t fallen down somewhere close by, he’ll be back.”

But he did not come back. When the rest of the men arose we had another long search, with no result. At noon we decided, reluctantly, to go on our way, hoping that if he had strayed somewhere he could catch up with us.

We hiked down into the valley, going farther and farther into the trees. There was no sign of Rifakh, although from time to time we stopped and shouted in case he was searching for us. We felt there was small risk of discovery, for that dark valley was as empty as a pauper’s purse, but nevertheless, after a while the sound of our voices echoing back through the damp glades became unpleasant. We continued on in silence.

Twilight comes early in the bosom of the mountains; by midafternoon it was already becoming dark. Young Fawn—the name had stuck, against the youth’s protests—who of all of us was the most disturbed by the disappearance of Rifakh, stopped the company suddenly, shouting: “Look there!”

We straightaway turned to see where he was pointing, but the thick trees and shadows revealed nothing.

“I saw a shape!” the young one said. “It was just a short way back, following us. Perhaps it is the missing soldier.”

Naturally the men ran back to look, but though we scoured the bushes we could find no trace of anyone. We decided that the failing light had played Fawn a trick—that he had seen a hind or somesuch.

Two other times he called out that he saw a shape. The last time one of the other soldiers glimpsed it too: a dark, manlike form, moving rapidly beneath the trees a bow-shot away. Close inspection still yielded no evidence, and as the group trod wearily back to the path again Walid the under-vizier turned to Fawn with a hard, flat look.

“Perhaps it would be better, young master, if you talked no more of shadowshapes.”

“But I saw it!” the boy cried. “That soldier Mohammad saw it too!”

“I have no doubt of that,” answered Walid al-Salameh, “but think on this: we have gone several times to see what it might be, and have found no sign of any living man. Perhaps our Rifakh is dead; perhaps he fell into a stream and drowned, or hit his head upon a rock. His spirit may be following us because it does not wish to stay in this unfamiliar place. That does not mean we want to go and find it.”

“But...” the other began.

“Enough!” spat the chief clerk Abdallah. “You heard the under-vizier, young prankster. We shall have no more talk of your godless spirits. You will straightaway leave off telling such things!”

“Your concern is appreciated, Abdallah,” Walid said coldly, “but I do not require your help in this matter.” The vizier strode away.

I was almost glad the clerk had added his voice, because such ideas would not keep the journey in good order...but like the under-vizier I, too, had been rubbed and grated by the clerk’s highhandedness. I am sure others felt the same, for no more was said on the subject all evening.

Allah, though, always has the last word—and who are we to try to understand His ways? We bedded down a very quiet camp that night, the idea of poor Rifakh’s lost soul hanging unspoken in the air.

From a thin, unpleasant sleep I woke to find the camp in chaos. “It’s Mohammad, the soldier!” Fawn was crying. “He’s been killed! He’s dead!”

It was true. The mullah Ruad, first up in the morning, had found the man’s blanket empty, then found his body a few short yards out of the clearing.

“His throat has been slashed out,” said Ibn Fahad.

It looked like a wild beast had been at him. The ground beneath was dark with blood, and his eyes were wide open.

Above the cursing of the soldiers and the murmured holy words of the mullah, who looked quite green of face, I heard another sound. The young shepherd-lad, grimly silent all the day before, was rocking back and forth on the ground by the remains of the cook-fire, moaning.

“Vampyr...” he wept, “...vampyr, the vampyr...”

All the companions were, of course, completely unmanned by these events. While we buried Mohammad in a hastily dug grave those assembled darted glances over their shoulders into the forest vegetation. Even Ruad, as he spoke the words of the holy Koran, had trouble keeping his eyes down. Ibn Fahad and I agreed between ourselves to maintain that Mohammad had fallen prey to a wolf or some other beast, but our fellow travelers found it hard even to pretend agreement. Only the under-vizier and the clerk Abdallah seemed to have their wits fully about them, and Abdallah made no secret of his contempt for the others. We set out again at once.

Our company was somber that day—and no wonder. No one wished to speak of the obvious, nor did they have much stomach for talk of lighter things—it was a silent file of men that moved through the mountain fastnesses.

As the shadows of evening began to roll down, the dark shape was with us again, flitting along just in sight, disappearing for a while only to return, bobbing along behind us like a jackdaw. My skin was crawling—as you may well believe—though I tried to hide it.

We set camp, building a large fire and moving near to it, and had a sullen, close-cramped supper. Ibn Fahad, Abdallah, the vizier, and I were still speaking of the follower only as some beast. Abdallah may even have believed it—not from ordinary foolishness, but because he was the type of man who was unwilling to believe there might be anything he himself could not compass.

As we took turns standing guard the young mullah led the far from-sleepy men in prayer. The voices rose up with the smoke, neither seeming to be of much substance against the wind of those old, cold mountains.

I sidled over to the shepherd-lad. He’d become, if anything, more close-mouthed since the discovery of the morning.

“This ‘vampyr’ you spoke of...” I said quietly. “What do your people do to protect themselves from it?”

He looked up at me with a sad smile.

“Lock the doors.”

I stared across at the other men—young Fawn with clenched mouth and furrowed brow; the mullah Ruad, eyes closed, plump cheeks awash with sweat as he prayed; Ibn Fahad gazing coolly outward, ever outward—and then I returned the boy’s sad smile.

“No doors to lock, no windows to bar,” I said. “What else?”

“There is an herb we hang about our houses...” he said, and fumbled for the word in our unfamiliar language. After a moment he gave up. “It does not matter. We have none. None grows here.”

I leaned forward, putting my face next to his face. “For the love of God, boy, what else?”—I knew it was not a beast of the earth. I knew. I had seen that fluttering shadow.

“Well...” he mumbled, turning his face away, “...they say, some men do, that you can tell stories....”

“What!” I thought he had gone mad.

“This is what my grandfather says. The vampyr will stop to hear the story you tell—if it is a good one—and if you continue it until daylight he must return to the...place of the dead.”

There was a sudden shriek. I leaped to my feet, fumbling for my knife...but it was only Ruad, who had put his foot against a hot coal. I sank down again, heart hammering.

“Stories?” I asked.

“I have only heard so,” he said, struggling for the right phrases. “We try to keep them farther away than that—they must come close to hear a man talking.”

Later, after the fire had gone down, we placed sentries and went to our blankets. I lay a long while thinking of what the Armenite boy had said before I slept.

A hideous screeching sound woke me. It was not yet dawn, and this time no one had burned himself on a glowing ember.

One of the two soldiers who had been standing picket lay on the forest floor, blood gouting from a great wound on the side of his head. In the torchlight it looked as though his skull had been smashed with a heavy cudgel. The other sentry was gone, but there was a terrible thrashing in the underbrush beyond the camp, and screams that would have sounded like an animal in a cruel trap but for the half-formed words that bubbled up from time to time.

We crouched, huddled, staring like startled rabbits. The screaming began to die away. Suddenly Ruad started up, heavy and clumsy getting to his feet. I saw tears in his eyes. “We...we must not leave our fellow to s-s-suffer so!” he cried, and looked around at all of us. I don’t think anyone could hold his eye except the clerk Abdallah. I could not.

“Be silent, fool!” the clerk said, heedless of blasphemy. “It is a wild beast. It is for these cowardly soldiers to attend to, not a man of God!”

The young mullah stared at him for a moment, and a change came over his face. The tears were still wet on his cheeks, but I saw his jaw firm and his shoulders square.

“No,” he said. “We cannot leave him to Shaitan’s servant. If you will not go to him, I will.” He rolled up the scroll he had been nervously fingering and kissed it. A shaft of moonlight played across the gold letters.

I tried to grab his arm as he went past me, but he shook me off with surprising strength, then moved toward the brush, where the screeching had died down to a low, broken moaning.

“Come back, you idiot!” Abdallah shrieked at him. “This is foolishness! Come back!”

The young holy man looked back over his shoulder, darting a look at Abdallah I could not easily describe, then turned around and continued forward, holding the parchment scroll before him as if it were a candle against the dark night.

“There is no God but Allah!” I heard him cry. “And Mohammad is His prophet!” Then he was gone.

After a long moment of silence there came the sound of the holy words of the Koran, chanted in an unsteady voice. We could hear the mullah making his ungraceful way out through the thicket. I was not the only one who held his breath.

Next there was crashing, and branches snapping, as though some huge beast was leaping through the brush; the mullah’s chanting became a howl. Men cursed helplessly. Before the cry had faded, though, another scream came—numbingly loud, the rage of a powerful animal, full of shock and surprise. It had words in it, although not in any tongue I had ever heard before...or since.

Another great thrashing, and then nothing but silence. We lit another fire and sat sleepless until dawn.

In the morning, despite my urgings, the company went to look for a trace of the sentry and the young priest. They found them both.

It made a grim picture, let me tell you, my friends. They hung upside down from the branches of a great tree. Their necks were torn, and they were white as chalk: all the blood had been drawn from them. We dragged the two stone-cold husks back to the camp-circle, and shortly thereafter buried them commonly with the other sentry, who had not survived his head wound.

One curious thing there was: on the ground beneath the hanging head of the young priest lay the remains of his holy scroll. It was scorched to black ash, and crumbled at my touch.

“So it was a cry of pain we heard,” said Ibn Fahad over my shoulder. “The devil-beast can be hurt, it appears.”

“Hurt, but not made to give over,” I observed. “And no other holy writings remain, nor any hands so holy to wield them, or mouth to speak them.” I looked pointedly over at Abdallah, who was giving unwanted instructions to the two remaining soldiers on how to spade the funeral dirt. I half-hoped one of them would take it on himself to brain the old meddler.

“True,” grunted Ibn Fahad. “Well, I have my doubts on how cold steel will fare, also.”

“As do I. But it could be there is yet a way we may save ourselves. The shepherd-boy told me of it. I will explain when we stop at mid-day.”

“I will be waiting eagerly,” said Ibn Fahad, favoring me with his half-smile. “I am glad to see someone else is thinking and planning beside myself. But perhaps you should tell us your plan on the march. Our daylight hours are becoming precious as blood, now. As a matter of fact, I think from now on we shall have to do without burial services.”

Well, there we were in a very nasty fix. As we walked I explained my plan to the group; they listened silently, downcast, like men condemned to death—not an unreasonable attitude, in all truth.

“Now, here’s the thing,” I told them. “If this young lout’s idea of tale-telling will work, we shall have to spend our nights yarning away. We may have to begin taking stops for sleeping in the daylight. Every moment walking, then, is precious—we must keep the pace up or we will die in these damned, haunted mountains. Also, while you walk, think of stories. From what the lad says we may have another ten days or a fortnight to go until we escape this country. We shall soon run out of things to tell about, unless you dig deep into your memories.”

There was grumbling, but it was too dispirited a group to offer much protest.

“Be silent, unless you have a better idea,” said Ibn Fahad. “Masrur is quite correct—although, if what I suspect is true, it may be the first time in his life he finds himself in that position.” He threw me a wicked grin, and one of the soldiers snickered. It was a good sound to hear.

We had a short mid-day rest—most of us got at least an hour’s sleep on the rocky ground—and then we walked on until the beginning of twilight. We were in the bottom of a long, thickly forested ravine, where we promptly built a large fire to keep away some of the darkness of the valley floor. Ah, but fire is a good friend!

Gathered around the blaze, the men cooked strips of venison on the ends of green sticks. We passed the waterskin and wished it was more—not for the first time.

“Now then,” I said, “I’ll go first, for at home I was the one called upon most often to tell tales, and I have a good fund of them. Some of you may sleep, but not all—there should always be two or three awake in case the teller falters or forgets. We cannot know if this will keep the creature at bay, but we should take no chances.”

So I began, telling first the story of The Four Clever Brothers. It was early, and no one was ready to sleep; all listened attentively as I spun it out, adding details here, stretching a description there.

When it ended I was applauded, and straight away began telling the story of the carpet merchant Salim and his unfaithful wife. That was perhaps not a good choice—it is a story about a vengeful djinn, and about death; but I went on nonetheless, finished it, then told two more.

As I was finishing the fourth story, about a brave orphan who finds a cave of jewels, I glimpsed a strange thing.

The fire was beginning to die down, and as I looked out over the flames I saw movement in the forest. The under-vizier Walid was directly across from me, and beyond his once-splendid robes a dark shape lurked. It came no closer than the edge of the trees, staying just out of the fire’s flickering light. I lost my voice for a moment then and stuttered, but quickly caught up the thread and finished. No one had noticed, I was sure.

I asked for the waterskin and motioned for Walid al-Salameh to continue. He took up with a tale of the rivalry beyond two wealthy houses in his native Isfahan. One or two of the others wrapped themselves tightly in their cloaks and lay down, staring up as they listened, watching the sparks rise into the darkness.

I pulled my hood down low on my brow to shield my gaze, and squinted out past Walid’s shoulder. The dark shape had moved a little nearer now to the lapping glow of the campfire.

It was man-shaped, that I could see fairly well, though it clung close to the trunk of a tree at clearing’s edge. Its face was in darkness; two ember-red eyes unblinkingly reflected the firelight. It seemed clothed in rags, but that could have been a trick of the shadows.

Huddled in the darkness a stone-throw away, it was listening.

I turned my head slowly across the circle. Most eyes were on the vizier; Fawn had curtained his in sleep. But Ibn Fahad, too, was staring out into the darkness. I suppose he felt my gaze, for he turned to me and nodded slightly: he had seen it too.

We went on until dawn, the men taking turns sleeping as one of the others told stories—mostly tales they had heard as children, occasionally of an adventure that had befallen them. Ibn Fahad and I said nothing of the dark shape that watched. Somewhere in the hour before dawn it disappeared.

It was a sleepy group that took to the trail that day, but we had all lived through the night. This alone put the men in better spirits, and we covered much ground.

That night we again sat around the fire. I told the story of The Gazelle King, and The Enchanted Peacock, and The Little Man with No Name, each of them longer and more complicated than the one before. Everyone except the clerk Abdallah contributed something—Abdallah and the shepherd-boy, that is. The chief-clerk said repeatedly that he had never wasted his time on foolishness such as learning stories. We were understandably reluctant to press our self-preservation into such unwilling hands.

The Armenite boy, our guide, sat quietly all the evening and listened to the men yarning away in a tongue that was not his own. When the moon had risen through the treetops, the shadow returned and stood silently outside the clearing. I saw the peasant lad look up. He saw it, I know, but like Ibn Fahad and I, he held his silence.

The next day brought us two catastrophes. As we were striking camp in the morning, happily no fewer than when we had set down the night before, the local lad took the waterskins down to the river that threaded the bottom of the ravine. When a long hour had passed and he had not returned, we went fearfully down to look for him.

He was gone. All but one of the waterskins lay on the streambank. He had filled them first.

The men were panicky. “The vampyr has taken him!” they cried.

“What does that foul creature need with a waterskin?” pointed out al-Salameh.

“He’s right,” I said. “No, I’m afraid our young friend has merely jumped ship, so to speak. I suppose he thinks his chances of getting back are better if he is alone.”

I wondered...I still wonder...if he made it back. He was not a bad fellow: witness the fact that he took only one water-bag, and left us the rest.

Thus, we found ourselves once more without a guide. Fortunately, I had discussed with him the general direction, and he had told Ibn Fahad and myself of the larger landmarks...but it was nevertheless with sunken hearts that we proceeded.

Later that day, in the early afternoon, the second blow fell.

We were coming up out of the valley, climbing diagonally along the steep side of the ravine. The damned Caucassian fogs had slimed the rocks and turned the ground soggy; the footing was treacherous.

Achmed, the older of the remaining pike-men, had been walking poorly all day. He had bad joints, anyway, he said; and the cold nights had been making them worse.

We had stopped to rest on an outcropping of rock that jutted from the valley wall; Achmed, the last in line, was just catching up to us when he slipped. He fell heavily onto his side and slid several feet down the muddy slope.

Ibn Fahad jumped up to look for a rope, but before he could get one from the bottom of his pack the other soldier—named Bekir, if memory serves—clambered down the grade to help his comrade.

He got a grip on Achmed’s tunic, and was just turning around to catch Ibn Fahad’s rope when the leg of the older man buckled beneath him and he fell backward. Bekir, caught off his balance, pitched back as well, his hand caught in the neck of Achmed’s tunic, and the two of them rolled end over end down the slope. Before anyone could so much as cry out they had both disappeared over the edge, like a wine jug rolling off a table-top. Just that sudden.

To fall such a distance certainly killed them.

We could not find the bodies, of course...could not even climb back down the ravine to look. Ibn Fahad’s remark about burials had taken on a terrible, ironic truth. We could but press on, now a party of five—myself, Ibn Fahad, the under-vizier Walid, Abdallah the clerk, and young Fawn. I doubt that there was a single one of our number who did not wonder which of us would next meet death in that lonesome place.

Ah, by Allah most high, I have never been so sick of the sound of my own voice as I was by the time nine more nights had passed. Ibn Fahad, I know, would say that I have never understood how sick everyone becomes of the sound of my voice—am I correct, old friend? But I was tired of it, tired of talking all night, tired of racking my brain for stories, tired of listening to the cracked voices of Walid and Ibn Fahad, tired to sickness of the damp, gray, oppressive mountains.

All were now aware of the haunting shade that stood outside our fire at night, waiting and listening. Young Fawn, in particular, could hardly hold up his turn at tale-telling, so much did his voice tremble.

Abdallah grew steadily colder and colder, congealing like rendered fat. The thing which followed was no respecter of his cynicism or his mathematics, and would not be banished for all the scorn he could muster. The skinny chief-clerk did not turn out to us, though, to support the story-circle, but sat silently and walked apart. Despite our terrible mutual danger he avoided our company as much as possible.

The tenth night after the loss of Achmed and Bekir we were running out of tales. We had been ground down by our circumstances, and were ourselves become nearly as shadowy as that which we feared.

Walid al-Salameh was droning on about some ancient bit of minor intrigue in the court of the Emperor Darius of Persia. Ibn Fahad leaned toward me, lowering his voice so that neither Abdallah nor Fawn—whose expression was one of complete and hopeless despair—could hear.

“Did you notice,” he whispered, “that our guest has made no appearance tonight?”

“It has not escaped me,” I said. “I hardly think it a good sign, however. If our talk no longer interests the creature, how long can it be until its thoughts return to our other uses?”

“I fear you’re right,” he responded, and gave a scratchy, painful chuckle. “There’s a good three or four more days walking, and hard walking at that, until we reach the bottom of these mountains and come once more onto the plain, at which point we might hope the devil-beast would leave us.”

“Ibn Fahad,” I said, shaking my head as I looked across at Fawn’s drawn, pale face, “I fear we shall not manage...”

As if to point up the truth of my fears, Walid here stopped his speech, coughing violently. I gave him to drink of the waterskin, but when he had finished he did not begin anew; he only sat looking darkly, as one lost, out to the forest.

“Good vizier,” I asked, “can you continue?”

He said nothing, and I quickly spoke in his place, trying to pick up the threads of a tale I had not been attending to. Walid leaned back, exhausted and breathing raggedly. Abdallah clucked his tongue in disgust. If I had not been fearfully occupied, I would have struck the clerk.

Just as I was beginning to find my way, inventing a continuation of the vizier’s Darian political meanderings, there came a shock that passed through all of us like a cold wind, and a new shadow appeared at the edge of the clearing. The vampyr had joined us.

Walid moaned and sat up, huddling by the fire. I faltered for a moment but went on. The candle-flame eyes regarded us unblinkingly, and the shadow shook for a moment as if folding great wings.

Suddenly Fawn leaped to his feet, swaying unsteadily. I lost the strands of the story completely and stared up at him in amazement.

“Creature!” he screamed. “Hell-spawn! Why do you torment us in this way? Why, why, why?”

Ibn Fahad reached up to pull him down, but the young man danced away like a shying horse. His mouth hung open and his eyes were starting from their dark-rimmed sockets.

“You great beast!” he continued to shriek. “Why do you toy with us? Why do you not just kill me—kill us all, set us free from this terrible, terrible...”

And with that he walked forward—away from the fire, toward the thing that crouched at forest’s edge.

“End this now!” Fawn shouted, and fell to his knees only a few strides from the smoldering red eyes, sobbing like a child.

“Stupid boy, get back!” I cried. Before I could get up to pull him back—and I would have, I swear by Allah’s name—there was a great rushing noise, and the black shape was gone, the lamps of its stare extinguished. Then, as we pulled the shuddering youth back to the campfire, something rustled in the trees. On the opposite side of the campfire one of the near branches suddenly bobbed beneath the weight of a strange new fruit—a black fruit with red-lit eyes. It made an awful croaking noise.

In our shock it was a few moments before we realized that the deep, rasping sound was speech—and the words were Arabic!

“...It...was...you...” it said, “...who chose...to play the game this way...”

Almost strangest of all, I would swear that this thing had never spoken our language before, never even heard it until we had wandered lost into the mountains. Something of its halting inflections, its strange hesitations, made me guess it had learned our speech from listening all these nights to our campfire stories.

“Demon!” shrilled Abdallah. “What manner of creature are you?!”

“You know...very well what kind of...thing I am, man. You may none of you know how, or why...but by now, you know what I am.”

“Why...why do you torment us so?!” shouted Fawn, writhing in Ibn Fahad’s strong grasp.

“Why does the...serpent kill...a rabbit? The serpent does not...hate. It kills to live, as do I...as do you.”

Abdallah lurched forward a step. “We do not slaughter our fellow men like this, devil-spawn!”

“C-c-clerk!” the black shape hissed, and dropped down from the tree. “C-close your foolish mouth! You push me too far!” It bobbed, as if agitated. “The curse of human ways! Even now you provoke me more than you should, you huffing...insect! Enough!”

The vampyr seemed to leap upward, and with a great rattling of leaves he scuttled away along the limb of a tall tree. I was fumbling for my sword, but before I could find it the creature spoke again from his high perch.

“The young one asked me why I ‘toy’ with you. I do not. If I do not kill, I will suffer. More than I suffer already.

“Despite what this clerk says, though, I am not a creature without... without feelings as men have them. Less and less do I wish to destroy you.

“For the first time in a great age I have listened to the sound of human voices that were not screams of fear. I have approached a circle of men without the barking of dogs, and have listened to them talk.

“It has almost been like being a man again.”

“And this is how you show your pleasure?” the under-vizier Walid asked, teeth chattering. “By k-k-killing us?”

“I am what I am,” said the beast. “...But for all that, you have inspired a certain desire for companionship. It puts me in mind of things that I can barely remember.

“I propose that we make a...bargain,” said the vampyr. “A...wager?”

I had found my sword, and Ibn Fahad had drawn his as well, but we both knew we could not kill a thing like this—a red-eyed demon that could leap five cubits in the air and had learned to speak our language in a fortnight.

“No bargains with Shaitan!” spat the clerk Abdallah.

“What do you mean?” I demanded, inwardly marveling that such an unlikely dialogue should ever take place on the earth. “Pay no attention to the...” I curled my lip, “...holy man.” Abdallah shot me a venomous glance.

“Hear me, then,” the creature said, and in the deep recesses of the tree seemed once more to unfold and stretch great wings. “Hear me. I must kill to live, and my nature is such that I cannot choose to die. That is the way of things.

“I offer you now, however, the chance to win safe passage out of my domain, these hills. We shall have a contest, a wager if you like; if you best me you shall go freely, and I shall turn once more to the musty, slow-blooded peasants of the local valleys.”

Ibn Fahad laughed bitterly. “What, are we to fight you then? So be it!”

“I would snap your spine like a dry branch,” croaked the black shape. “No, you have held me these many nights telling stories; it is storytelling that will win you safe passage. We will have a contest, one that will suit my whims: we shall relate the saddest of all stories. That is my demand. You may tell three, I will tell only one. If you can best me with any or all, you shall go unhindered by me.”

“And if we lose?!” I cried. “And who shall judge?”

“You may judge,” it said, and the deep, thick voice took on a tone of grim amusement. “If you can look into my eyes and tell me that you have bested my sad tale...why, then I shall believe you.

“If you lose,” it said, “then one of your number shall come to me, and pay the price of your defeat. Those are my terms, otherwise I shall hunt you down one at a time—for in truth, your present tale-telling has begun to lose my interest.”

Ibn Fahad darted a worried look in my direction. Fawn and the others stared at the demon-shape in mute terror and astonishment.

“We shall...we shall give you our decision at sunset tomorrow,” I said. “We must be allowed to think and talk.”

“As you wish,” said the vampyr. “But if you accept my challenge, the game must begin then. After all, we have only a few more days to spend together.” And at this the terrible creature laughed, a sound like the bark being pulled from the trunk of a rotted tree. Then the shadow was gone.

In the end we had to accede to the creature’s wager, of course. We knew he was not wrong in his assessment of us—we were just wagging our beards over the nightly campfire, no longer even listening to our own tales. Whatever magic had held the vampyr at bay had drained out like meal from a torn sack.

I racked my poor brains all afternoon for stories of sadness, but could think of nothing that seemed to fit, that seemed significant enough for the vital purpose at hand. I had been doing most of the talking for several nights running, and had exhausted virtually every story I had ever heard—and I was never much good at making them up, as Ibn Fahad will attest. Yes, go ahead and smile, old comrade.

Actually, it was Ibn Fahad who volunteered the first tale. I asked him what it was, but he would not tell me. “Let me save what potency it may have,” he said. The under-vizier Walid also had something he deemed suitable; I was racking my brain fruitlessly for a third time when young Fawn piped up that he would tell a tale himself. I looked him over, rosy cheeks and long-lashed eyes, and asked him what he could possibly know of sadness. Even as I spoke I realized my cruelty, standing as we all did in the shadow of death or worse, but it was too late to take it back.

Fawn did not flinch. He was folding his cloak as he sat cross-ankled on the ground, folding and unfolding it. He looked up and said: “I shall tell a sad story about love. All the saddest stories are about love.”

These young shavetails, I thought—although I was not ten years his senior—a sad story about love. But I could not think of better, and was forced to give in.

We walked as fast and far as we could that day, as if hoping that somehow, against all reason, we should find ourselves out of the gloomy, mist-sodden hills. But when twilight came the vast bulk of the mountains still hung above us. We made camp on the porch of a great standing rock, as though protection at our backs would avail us of something if the night went badly.

The fire had only just taken hold, and the sun had dipped below the rim of the hills a moment before, when a cold wind made the branches of the trees whip back and forth. We knew without speaking, without looking at one another, that the creature had come.

“Have you made your decision?” The harsh voice from the trees sounded strange, as if its owner was trying to speak lightly, carelessly—but I only heard death in those cold syllables.

“We have,” said Ibn Fahad, drawing himself up out of his involuntary half-crouch to stand erect. “We will accept your wager. Do you wish to begin?”

“Oh, no...” the thing said, and made a flapping noise. “That would take all of the...suspense from the contest, would it not? No, I insist that you begin.”

“I am first, then,” Ibn Fahad said, looking around our circle for confirmation. The dark shape moved abruptly toward us. Before we could scatter the vampyr stopped, a few short steps away.

“Do not fear,” it grated. Close to one’s ear the voice was even odder and more strained. “I have come nearer to hear the story and see the teller—for surely that is part of any tale—but I shall move no farther. Begin.”

Everybody but myself stared into the fire, hugging their knees, keeping their eyes averted from the bundle of darkness that sat at our shoulders. I had the fire between myself and the creature, and felt safer than if I had sat like Walid and Abdallah, with nothing between the beast and my back but cold ground.

The vampyr sat hunched, as if imitating our posture, its eyes hooded so that only a flicker of scarlet light, like a half-buried brand, showed through each slit. It was black, this manlike thing—not black as a Negro, mind you, but black as burnt steel, black as the mouth of a cave. It bore the aspect of someone dead of the plague. Rags wrapped it, mouldering, filthy bits of cloth, rotten as old bread...but the curve of its back spoke of terrible life—a great black cricket poised to jump.

Ibn Fahad’s Story

Many years ago [he began], I traveled for a good time in Egypt. I was indigent, then, and journeyed wherever the prospect of payment for a sword arm beckoned.

I found myself at last in the household guard of a rich merchant in Alexandria. I was happy enough there; and I enjoyed walking in the busy streets, so unlike the village in which I was born.

One summer evening I found myself walking down an unfamiliar street. It emptied out into a little square that sat below the front of an old mosque. The square was full of people: merchants and fishwives, a juggler or two, but most of the crowd was drawn up to the facade of the mosque, pressed in close together.

At first, as I strolled across the square, I thought prayers were about to begin, but it was still some time until sunset. I wondered if perhaps some notable imam was speaking from the mosque steps, but as I approached I could see that all the assembly were staring upward, craning their necks back as if the sun itself, on its way to its western mooring, had become snagged on one of the minarets.

But instead of the sun, what stood on the onion-shaped dome was the silhouette of a man, who seemed to be staring out toward the horizon.

“Who is that?” I asked a man near me.

“It is Ha’arud al-Emwiya, the Sufi,” the man told me, never lowering his eyes from the tower above.

“Is he caught up there?” I demanded. “Will he not fall?”

“Watch,” was all the man said. I did.

A moment later, much to my horror, the small dark figure of Ha’arud the Sufi seemed to go rigid, then toppled from the minaret’s rim like a stone. I gasped in shock, and so did a few others around me, but the rest of the crowd only stood in hushed attention.

Then an incredible thing happened. The tumbling holy man spread his arms out from his shoulders, like a bird’s wings, and his downward fall became a swooping glide. He bottomed out high above the crowd, then sped upward, riding the wind like a leaf, spinning, somersaulting, stopping at last to drift to the ground as gently as a bit of eiderdown. Meanwhile, all the assembly was chanting “God is great! God is great!” When the Sufi had touched the earth with his bare feet the people surrounded him, touching his rough woolen garments and crying out his name. He said nothing, only stood and smiled, and before too long the people began to wander away, talking amongst themselves.

“But this is truly marvelous!” I said to the man who stood by me.

“Before every holy day he flies,” the man said, and shrugged. “I am surprised this is the first time you have heard of Ha’arud al-Emwiya.”

I was determined to speak to this amazing man, and as the crowd dispersed I approached and asked if I might buy him a glass of tea. Close up he had a look of seamed roguishness that seemed surprising placed against the great favor in which Allah must have held him. He smilingly agreed, and accompanied me to a tea shop close by in the Street of Weavers.

“How is it, if you will pardon my forwardness, that you of all holy men are so gifted?”

He looked up from the tea cupped in his palms and grinned. He had only two teeth. “Balance,” he said.

I was surprised. “A cat has balance,” I responded, “but they nevertheless must wait for the pigeons to land.”

“I refer to a different sort of balance,” he said. “The balance between Allah and Shaitan, which, as you know, Allah the All-Knowing has created as an equilibrium of exquisite delicacy.”

“Explain please, master.” I called for wine, but Ha’arud refused any himself.

“In all things care must be exercised,” he explained. “Thus it is too with my flying. Many men holier than I are as earthbound as stones. Many other men have lived so poorly as to shame the Devil himself, yet they cannot take to the air, either. Only I, if I may be excused what sounds self-satisfied, have discovered perfect balance. Thus, each year before the holy days I tot up my score carefully, committing small peccadilloes or acts of faith as needed until the balance is exactly, exactly balanced. Thus, when I jump from the mosque, neither Allah nor the Arch-Enemy has claim on my soul, and they bear me up until a later date, at which time the issue shall be clearer.” He smiled again and drained his tea.

“You are...a sort of chessboard on which God and the Devil contend?” I asked, perplexed.

“A flying chessboard, yes.”

We talked for a long while, as the shadows grew long across the Street of the Weavers, but the Sufi Ha’arud adhered stubbornly to his explanation. I must have seemed disbelieving, for he finally proposed that we ascend to the top of the mosque so he could demonstrate.

I was more than a little drunk, and he, imbibing only tea, was filled nonetheless with a strange gleefulness. We made our way up the many winding stairs and climbed out onto the narrow ledge that circled the minaret like a crown. The cool night air, and the thousands of winking lights of Alexandria far below, sobered me rapidly. “I suddenly find all your precepts very sound,” I said. “Let us go down.”

But Ha’arud would have none of it, and proceeded to step lightly off the edge of the dome. He hovered, like a bumblebee, a hundred feet above the dusty street. “Balance,” he said with great satisfaction.

“But,” I asked, “is the good deed of giving me this demonstration enough to offset the pride with which you exhibit your skill?” I was cold and wanted to get down, and hoped to shorten the exhibition.

Instead, hearing my question, Ha’arud screwed up his face as though it was something he had not given thought to. A moment later, with a shriek of surprise, he plummeted down out of my sight to smash on the mosque’s stone steps, as dead as dead.

Ibn Fahad, having lost himself in remembering the story, poked at the campfire. “Thus, the problem with matters of delicate balance,” he said, and shook his head.

The whispering rustle of our dark visitor brought us sharply back. “Interesting,” the creature rasped. “Sad, yes. Sad enough? We shall see. Who is the next of your number?”

A cold chill, like fever, swept over me at those calm words.

“I...I am next...” said Fawn, voice taut as a bowstring. “Shall I begin?”

“The vampyr said nothing, only bobbed the black lump of his head. The youth cleared his throat and began.