

Saturday, 3 July 1999, 3:18 AM (local time)
Caves of Ten Thousand Sorrows
Near Petra, Jordan

Elijah Ahmed, caliph of Alamut, walked silently through the darkness toward his destiny. His sandals were left miles behind, neatly arranged before the threshold of the caverns. His feet, the soles of which had not felt the fire of sun-scorched desert sands since the first days of the Holy Prophet, did not so much as displace a single pebble or disturb a granule of dust from its resting place upon the sandstone.

Elijah's mind was quiet. Calming scripture arose from his soul like the cool evening breeze blowing from the north. *He, Allah, is One. Allah is He on Whom all depend. He begets not, nor is He begotten, and none is like Him.*

The darkness was complete, yet the caliph stepped with surety. Countless passages branched off from the winding tunnel he followed, but Elijah's deliberate pace did not once slacken. Never before had he traversed this path, but the twists of the rough-hewn corridors were as familiar to him as the weave of his simple muslin robe. He could not deny that which drew him forward. He could not lose his way.

The passages wound this way and that, seemingly without reason; sharp, spiraling curves that nearly met themselves, broad arcs to the northwest, squared turns to the south, zigs and zags leading tangentially eastward but never directly toward the rising sun. Among the sculptured chaos, however, Elijah Ahmed's steps carried him always down, always deeper toward the heart of the earth.

He, Allah, is One. Allah is He on Whom all depend. He begets not, nor is He begotten, and none is like Him.

When finally Elijah had taken his last step, he stood not in one of the corridors of the past hours, but in a vast chamber. Darkness opened before him like the void, but not even the absence of light could hide from his eyes the presence of the herald.

It sat upon an arrangement of mammoth stones, an unadorned throne crafted from bedrock. The herald, too, was unadorned. Its naked, childlike body resembled a sculpture of hard-packed coal, each fissure, each crack in the kiln-hardened surface actually a jagged scar streaking like black lightning across the blackest midnight sky—black except for a crescent and a handful of matching bone-white stars. The crescent moon of this midnight was a necklace of bone that lay draped across the chest of the herald's perfectly motionless body. The stars were bone as well, though no mere accoutrements; they were the bones of ur-Shulgi, visible where the midnight skin had peeled back or cracked and fallen away; they were the sheaths of the herald's essence, and his marrow was vengeance.

Thus was the being Elijah Ahmed faced.

Elijah Ahmed, caliph of Alamut, one of the tripartite *du'at*, looked into the deep emptiness that should have been the herald's eyes. The sockets were set beneath sharp ridges of bone, and the gaping nothingness was like an accusation of wrongdoing and injury thousands of years old, as if Elijah himself had gouged out the eyes in sport or cruel jest.

And yet the herald looked upon Elijah, and the

herald did see.

“Elijah Ahmed,” spoke ur-Shulgi.

At once, Elijah prostrated himself before the herald. The sandstone, which should have been cool within the womb of the earth, burned the caliph’s forehead. But he did not stir.

“Childe of Haqim,” spoke the herald. “Blood of his blood of his blood of his blood.” Ur-Shulgi’s voice filled the chamber like the south desert wind. His words stung like the first pricks of the sandstorm that gnaws flesh from bone.

“Rise, Elijah Ahmed.”

The caliph obeyed, as would he have even had he desired otherwise. He rose to one knee. The sandstone, to the touch, had become the wide desert floor at noon. He needn’t look at the palms of his hands to know that his own dark skin crisped—the left knee, on which his weight rested; the sole of his right foot; the top of the left. Head bowed, eyes downcast, Elijah ignored the fire of his body and paid silent homage to the herald of his master.

But a storm was rising.

The desert winds, an open furnace stoked by the rage of ancients, tore at him. His thin muslin robe quickly burned away, as did his hair, his eyebrows, and lashes. The caliph closed his eyes against the heat, but his eyelids soon curled back like singed paper. He had no choice but to look upon his reckoning.

In that instant, Elijah Ahmed knew fear. It was a mark of his wisdom. For who but the fool does not fear the power of heaven unleashed? In that instant, Elijah knew also the unvoiced question given form in that fiery desert wind:

Who gives you life, Elijah Ahmed?

Elijah could no longer reason, so great had become the heat, but he didn't need reason in the face of this challenge. The question was not new to him; it had dogged him as long as he remembered, since before wise Thetmes Embraced him into unending death, since Elijah's mortal days following behind in the footsteps of the Holy Prophet. From deep within Elijah's soul, the answer rose full like a gourd dipped in an oasis well.

Allah gives me life.

The fiery wind grew to a raging maelstrom. It roared in Elijah's ears, those fragile shells of flesh that began to melt and run down the sides of his face. His naked eyes, too, were assaulted by the storm. His tears dried before he could cry them.

And then the herald was no longer sitting far across the chamber upon his great throne. He had not moved, but now ur-Shulgi stood motionless before Elijah, mere inches from the caliph. The herald's craggy, coal-black skin shone amidst the violence of the vortex.

"Young Allah," said ur-Shulgi. "Are you certain, childe of Haqim?"

Elijah's face was now upturned, though he did not remember moving. His eyes became pools of blood, as the tender flesh disintegrated beneath the fury of ur-Shulgi. The caliph's skin cracked and peeled away. As the last of vision fled, Elijah was not aware, could not be aware, of the eternal moment in which he resembled nothing so much as the herald before whom he knelt. Elijah wanted to open his mouth, wanted to speak, but the muscles of his jaw were be-

yond use and his tongue was shriveled away to a smoldering lump.

As flesh burned away, one belief resounded from the core of Elijah Ahmed's being: *Haqim has stretched my existence, but it was Allah gave me life. He, Allah, is One. Allah is He on Whom all depend. He begets not, nor is He begotten, and none is like Him.*

"Very well," said ur-Shulgi. His words found their way through Elijah's ruined ears, within the mind that was beyond pain. "In the name of the Eldest, I reclaim that which is rightfully his."

No sooner was it said than the blackened form that had been Elijah Ahmed, caliph of Alamut, vomited forth the blood of Haqim into a large earthen pot.

Many hours later, the winds settled, and all was again silent stillness of the void.