



# ABBAS' COUP

WRITTEN  
BY

*His Highness, the Emir of Raspur, Ardashir Osmani*  
*His Imperial Majesty, the Great Khan, Babak Kapav Mehr*  
*His Excellency Thomas Mountain*  
*The Agha Andarosel*

Also Incorporating

# SHOSU ABBAS

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"Your Majesty?" The Vizier of Defence, Amin Dourani, bowed low, and his gilt epaulettes seemed to blaze in the firelight. "What brings you here, Dourani? The conference is over, the army is ready to march and with that the attack on Mestechap will begin tomorrow."

The stooping Vizier edged forward a little.

"I bring bad news o glorious Shah. One of the Palace guards was found dead five minutes ago with a crossbow bolt in him! Assassins from Mestechap have penetrated the Palace Grounds and I've come to take you to safety."

Shah Behruz drew his sword and Vizier Dourani did the same. "What are we waiting for? Let's go." The pair of them made for the nearest door, the aged Shahanshah fearlessly leading the way. Suddenly in a deft stroke Vizier Dourani plunged his scimitar into his master's back. The Shah's ruby encrusted sword fell to the marble floor with a loud clatter. Desperately Dourani thrust his left hand over the mouth of the mortally wounded Shahanshah. Behruz Shah however had always been a strong man and even in his dotage he could bellow like an ox.

"Treason!" he roared as Dourani's feeble left hand vainly attempted to muffle the belligerent cry. It was to no avail the sound echoed around the room. Next the mighty Shah bit hard on the traitor's hand and the bones duly crunched. This only caused

Dourani to drive his blade in deeper, till the vital organ was pierced. With that the Great Shah Hesam was dead.

Dourani, now utterly bathed in sweat and with a devilish heart that palpated in fear at the discovery of his unprecedented crime, had countenanced dragging the body back onto the throne, and sheathing the Shah's sword back into its scabbard. But there was no time the deed was done and the loud commotion would surely draw the attention of courtiers and servants. So Dourani had but one course open, to run and ran to the man who had to be the first on the scene if the plan was to succeed. So Dourani ran to the private chambers of the Grand Vizier Abbas.

"The deed is done. The Shah is dead."

"So long live the new Shah," said Abbas "or to put it another way, long live myself."

"But what about the Shah's daughter, Princess Grace? Shall I kill her too?"

"No. You know, Vizer Dourani, that silence at a Royal marriage, according to tradition, is consent. Tomorrow I will marry the Princess to a Prince from Mestechap - yes he has been housed with me in secret for the past week now - to bring peace between our two nations. And she will be spirited away."

"She won't remain silent, your Majesty. She'll protest."

"Not with her hands bound and her mouth gagged under the bridal veil."

"The ropes will be seen."

"Not if flowers are woven into them. It would be as if she were joyfully bearing a garland in commemoration of her soon to be lost maidenhood."

Sharon, Princess Grace's maid, had been listening to this with an ear against the door. She turned and ran to warn the Princess.

The Princess's handmaid, a Willith servant brought from Yengisia by Behruz II after his successful courtship of and marriage to a Yengisian Countess to care for their subsequent daughter, knew all too well what would become of her beloved Princess if she were married to a Mestechap Prince.

The Sultan of Mestechap, a voracious, bloodthirsty man whose animosity both to the Babkhans of the East and the Williths of the North would no doubt consider the Crown Princess of Babkha, a daughter of Willithia, a fine trophy to add to his harems.

Grand Vizier Abbas, knowing that the Princess, a woman of wisdom and strong abilities would certainly become a thorn in his side if she were to prematurely discover her exile from Babkha ensured her absolute isolation by assigning four of the Royal Palaces Razjanian Guards.

The Razjanian Guards, an elite band of soldiers, were the Children of corrupted or poor women in Razjania and Dehvaz taken in from birth and trained as soldiers without ever having contact with the outside world.

Realising the dangers of the Razjanian Guards, and the watchful eye of Vizier Dorani Sharon realised that in order to save the Princess, she would need to be able to form a loyalist Army from around the Empire.

If there was any one Babkhan battalion that would stand to topple the New Shah, it was the Kapav Guards, the fiercely loyal Defenders of the Kapav Dynasty, descendants from the Babkhan civil war, and accustomed to the tactics of scheming Family members and Viziers.

Reza Bin Sharif, a close friend of the murdered Shah, and the General of the Kapav Guards however, was quickly assassinated by the Razjanian Guards, whom owed their allegiance to none other than Vizier Dorani, the former Satrap of that Province.

Sharon, a strong woman of immense capabilities, whose guidance had led Princess Grace to her amazing wisdom from youth, knew that she too would soon be in danger and was preparing to escape the Royal Palace at Kamalshahr to Parestan, where she would seek the Provinces Leaders and hoped to convince the Satrap, whose first wife, the daughter of a Chelpian Sultan would undoubtedly lead a Loyal force to overtake the capital and save the Princess...

Two days passed. Shah Behruz II was ceremonially buried on the first day in the Royal tombs of Babkha. Vizier Dourani gave the funeral oration praising him in front of a vast crowd of rich and poor Babkhan citizens. The crowd was told that Princess Grace was too upset to attend her father's funeral.

"Before we consign his Majesty to the tomb," finished Vizier Dourani, "it is traditional to publicly announce his successor. His Majesty's Will said that if he died before the Princess's twenty-first birthday, he wanted his Grand Vizier, Abbas, to rule with a firm but capable hand as Shah Abbas I."

There were angry murmurs from a section of the crowd and the Razjanian Guards who were present drew their swords.

"I now consign his Majesty to his eternal rest." As the pallbearers lowered the coffin into its niche the murmuring turned into sobbing and the crowd slowly dispersed. The Guards sheathed their swords with relief. Vizier Dourani turned to their commander. "Seal up the whole Royal Palace. Every door leading outside must have at least two guards."

The next day Sharon paced up and down her bedroom in frustration. Her attempt to leave for Parestan had been foiled at the last moment. Then an idea came to her. She went to the Great Hall. A hubbub filled the air. The kitchen servants carried in great golden plates and silver candlesticks whilst others set the table with the best bone china.

From inside the kitchen delicious smells of meat and vegetables being carefully cooked wafted out every time the door was opened. Sharon sought out her best friend, Eleanor, a beautiful Elfinshi slave from the barbarous and unexplored Northern continents who worked in the kitchens. "Eleanor, what's going on?"

"Haven't you heard, Sharon? Shah Abbas has declared peace with the Sultan of Mestechap."

"Tomorrow the Sultan will arrive and marry Princess Grace. Then they will watch

Shah Abbas's coronation. Personally, I don't know why the Princess would want to marry a man like that."

"She doesn't! She's being held incommunicado in her bedroom."

Speaking softly Sharon told her everything she had learned and her plan to escape.

"Poor Grace! There's nothing that the servants or I can do directly. Womenfolk and eunuchs with kitchen knives and meat cleavers are no match for the spears and swords of the palace guards. But I will help you. And if it is possible I will sabotage that evil wedding. I don't know how." She went into the kitchen and came out with a kitchen knife, which she quietly passed to Sharon.

That night Sharon inserted the knife into the floorboards of her bedroom and levered them up. Then she carefully chipped through the thin plaster of the floor and pulled it away. The cool night air blew in. She looked down. Her bedroom, on the Palace's first floor, jutted out of the wall. Below her were two Razjanian Guards. One slept but the other was fully awake and alert and his spear was pointing up.

She waited silently, hardly daring to breath, until he shifted his position and pointed his spear forwards.

Then she leapt down and cut his throat from behind with one slash. Grabbing his spear, she ran the other guard through with it within seconds. The guards were guarding the Royal Punts. Sharon turned to face the Palace one last time.

"I promise you, Grace, you will be rescued. When I come back it will be with an army to beat this coup and behead those responsible." She took the weapons from the guards. These, with some food and water from the kitchen and a pillow from her bedroom, were all that she took. She got into the smallest punt and punted away down the river towards Parestan.

At the same time, on the other side of the Palace, the door of Princess Grace's bedroom was flung open. Shah Abbas walked in with Vizier Dourani and the four guards. One carried some rope. Another had a large white box. "Princess, I bring bad news. Your father is dead. "She burst into tears.

When she had finished crying she asked "How...how...?"

"I had him murdered." She flung herself at Abbas but the guards dragged her back whilst she cursed him with all the swear words in the Babkhan language. When she had finished a guard stuffed her mouth full of silk and tied it between her teeth.

"Mmmmmph!"

"Tomorrow I will marry you off to the Sultan of Messtechap, and for that I need your silence. I am sure that he will find you to be a wonderful new harem girl. I would break you in myself but I believe the Sultan takes a certain pride in deflowering virgins and I am in no mind to deprive my ally of any pleasure. Tie her up and dress her up." The guards tore off her scarlet dress and opened the box. First they put a pure white bridal dress on her and bound her arms to her sides.

Then they bound her hands in front of her and used a garland of white lilies to hide the ropes around her wrists.

A sky-blue cloak covered her other bonds and a silver band was put in her hair. They bound her to her bed and put a veil on her. Shah Abbas bent down, raised the veil and gave her a wet kiss on the forehead. "Good night Grace-tomorrow you will be wed."

He left her sobbing silently.

The next morning Princess Grace was dragged from her bed and taken by two Razjanian Guards to the Royal Mosque of Babkha. The walls and floor were made of great and elaborately carved slabs of black and white marble. At the front sat Abbas, still uncrowned, and his new Grand Vizier Dourani in their ceremonial robes of office.

The front rows held the rich and important people of Babkha and the Royal servants and Guards and a few token "common people" sat at the back. Swordsmen guarded the doors. Waiting for her was a fat and ugly old man dressed in garish finery-the Sultan of Mestichap, with two of his bodyguards.

The Sultan grinned when he saw Grace and he raised her veil and planted soft kisses on her face and forehead. "You will make a lovely new harem girl, my dear," he whispered in her ear, and she mmmphed at him in frustration. Nobody could hear her muffled cries in the hubbub. The Sultan flipped the veil back over her face and then he and his bodyguards took her down the aisle. As she passed Eleanor, the slave had edged her way forward to the front amongst the dignitaries from the enclosure reserved for commoners, managed to pass her a short sharp knife to cut her bonds with.

To the west of Kamalshahr lies the Royal game reserve of the Babkhan Shah's, a knotted man made forest that rises out of the very steppe that surrounds it. Ancient even in antiquity it serves as the last refuge of the fallen, the outlawed or the desperate. The only writ that runs in the forest is the Law of the Hunt.

"And what is it that so preoccupies your time, young man, that you would spend the day here in the Shah's forest, talking to trees and rocks" the old man said as he slowly approached the red-haired boy. He kept his balance through the use of a walking stick, which gave the impression of lameness.

The boy turned slowly. There was a frustrated look on his face that did nothing to hide the reddened eyes. "Old man! Whore keeper! How dare you speak to me?"

The old man chuckled as he approached and took a seat on a rock near the boy. "How dare you speak to your elders in such a voice? Have you no manners, boy?"

"Do you not know to whom you are speaking to?" the lad asked, as if his fame was not universal. "Surely you don't, your ignorance marks you as a fool, old man!"

"A fool, you say," the old man said, rubbing his chin. "I don't think I've been called a fool for quite some time." There was a pause, as the youngster seemed to try and come up with not so much a retort as a way of finishing the tiresome conversation with a shred of dignity. Before he could reply, however, the older man began again.

“You still have yet to answer my question; why is it you gibber to the four winds? Perhaps you are a magi.”

“A Christian to take your tongue, fool! I am a soldier of Allah, not some idolater! Concern yourself with your own affairs and leave me be,” the boy shouted, pointing the old mans route back down the path.

“And who would you be to order me so?” The old man, refused to budge instead swaying gently on his hobble stick, glanced down at the large sword resting against a tree stump. “Will you take your sword and strike me down if I choose to spite thee? Should I fear for my life?”

The boy took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Do you now that many who I count as my peers take pleasure from decapitating vile creatures of your class simply to gauge the sharpness of their blade. Know now that I am tempted.” However he made no move for his sword and his dire threat lacked conviction. “Yet perhaps that too might be rash.”

“Oh. Am I to take it you have been rash yourself some other time today?”

The boy chuckled. “That’s quite a tongue you have, ancient one.”

A hurt look overcame the face of the old man. “Now I am ancient; do I grow so old so quickly before your young eyes?”

The boy got up, still smiling. He walked over to the sword and picked it up. It was the most beautiful curved scimitar, gold leaved and jewel encrusted handle, exquisite blade, quite the most beautiful sword the old man had seen in a long long while. “Do you see this sword?”

The man did his best to seem unimpressed and even suppressed a faked yawn. “Why do you have it?”

The boy began to sputter, utterly flabbergasted at the stale smelling old goats ignorance. “I snatched it from the Dragons Grove, as the prophecy foretold!”

Again there was the blank look. “Prophecy? A what’s grove? ”

“The Prophecy of Omar Moyer!” The boy tapped the old mans wrinkled forehead with his index finger. “By Allah, how dim are you?”

The old man pursed his lips. “I must be very dim, since I cannot fathom why someone who speaks to the air while admitting himself a thief is holding the sword of this Omar Moyer and behaves for all the world like one of those accursed Satraps.”

The boy lowered the sword, letting the tip dig into the soft ground. “I wasn’t speaking to the air, or the trees or the birds! I was voicing my thoughts out loud! You cannot even begin to understand the weight that has been placed upon my shoulders.”

Reaching into his pocket, the old man produced a shiny red apple and held it out to

the boy. For a second, the boy hesitated, and then accepted the fruit with a nod of gratitude. Another one was produced and the two began to eat. "Perhaps if you told me what it is that you must discuss so loudly with yourself, I could offer an opinion."

The boy spat his first bite of apple out. "Now you believe that I am the one who is foolish if you think I will discuss the art of kings with a fakir!"

"The art of kings say ye? So, am I to assume that you are the Satrap or thief-in-chief of some poor district? Perhaps you are lord of these woods? I must confess you have raised my curiosity, oh great Satrap of trees."

The boy rolled his eyes. "You truly do not understand anything, do you? The Satrap of Zjandaria can only wield the sword of Omar Moyer if he hopes to rule the people of Babkha. I am Toghrul, Satrap of Zjandaria, rightful lord of the whole of the land."

A nod. "I've never heard of you, anyway pretenders have always been ten-a-Tomen, even under the old Shah Behruz, it will not get any better under Abbas and his thugs. Not that it will do you any good. Waving a pretty sword that you say belonged to a wizard which you stole from some fabled creature may gain you a following of peasants but never the throne, by Ormuzd you will be lucky to keep your very life, and still I have never heard your name in these parts."

Toghrul wiped his face with his hand in frustration. "I am the son of Xenophon, perhaps you have heard of him?"

"Oh yes," the old man smiled with recognition. "Now I remember that name."

"Yes, and I am his son, I have been a Satrap for nine months now. I was travelling to Kamalshahr to pay homage for the claim to my fathers land and title."

He crossed his arms and his face assumed a reddish hue similar to his hair colour. "But not now."

"Oh why is that then? Surely that sword of yours has not made you so arrogant that you cannot bow down long enough to receive what is yours by inheritance, or perhaps you intend to hack a path to the throne upon your arrival at the gates of the palace, if then this is so you had better cast that sword aside now and flee this very instant Westward, all the while praying that the vastness of the steppe will be enough to hide you."

"You, Old Man, have the countenance of a tutor, the tongue of a viper and..."  
Toghrul sniffed the air "the smell of an old goat. Tell me Old Man whom did you offend for it to be so that a man of your evident 'education' to be condemned to wander the back roads."

"Who condemned you to delusions of grandeur O noble Satrap?"

"You grizzled thing! Don't you see that I do not do this for myself? I have since childhood been pledged to honour the family name, to follow in my father's footsteps and to defeat his enemies?"

The Old Man studied Toghrul, beneath the habitual bluster and ill-disguised loneliness laid an intemperate steely resolve. "And why do you not call for your men of Zjandaria to assist you? Every prince, every Satrap, has a retinue, forgive me but where is yours?" The Old Man produced a wineskin, Toghrul eyed it with the suspicion of a true warrior of the faith, but in the end his thirst won through.

Toghrul took a deep swig from the wineskin. When he had finished, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "They will not listen to me! I am to them nothing but a boy! They will not accept me unless I pledge to raid their petty enemies. A warrior they want, a warrior I must be."

The old man took the wineskin back and put it back in his cloak without drinking from it. "Does it matter what one expects from a Satrap as opposed to what you get?"

"What in Allah's name is that supposed to mean?" Toghrul asked.

"You appear to be in a quandary about what the perception of a Satrap is," the old man began, his voice taking on its now usual scholarly tone. "You believe that you need to become a leader in the mould of what other, lesser men say you have to be; but at the same time, you wish to be like your father, undoubtedly the most successful Satrap of Babkha. Therefore, you would rather waste away your time here, in the seclusion of these woods, instead of facing the problem directly." The old man leaned closer. "Stop pleasing those rapists and murderers who swell your ranks and start acting like a man who is comfortable with power."

"And, pray tell, what is it I should be doing? For I swear I shall never be comfortable with my destiny." Toghrul questioned. "What is it that a Satrap is supposed to do when his lord is a tyrant and his neighbours fight amongst themselves? Does he not have a duty to take up arms in defence of those who support him?"

The old man shrugged and then stood up. "Is that what you wish to do?"

Toghrul put his head down and he shuffled his feet. "No. As Satrap, as he who by right should be Shah, it is my duty to unite the people, to build Babkha into a power, a place where all of its peoples are safe and protected. It serves no purpose to kill those I need to make this come about."

"Is this what others have done in the past?"

Toghrul looked up. "I suppose not. "

"A true leader must know when to fight and when not to; the true test of leadership is resisting the easy path in favour of the way that benefits everyone. True, young Satrap, if you take up that sword and strike down your enemies, you will be hailed as a great and powerful warrior."

Toghrul looked sheepishly at the old man. "And if I don't take up the sword...if I follow my heart and try to deal with my foes through discussion? I could end up dead..."



The old man nodded and took a step closer to the Satrap. Toghrol could smell the man; he had the odour of the dung heap. "Not your heart, your mind, let your mind rule your passions, use not discussion but intrigue. If by a small evil you achieve something good it is the good that you achieve that shall be remembered. Yet even with logic is it not more fitting to die trying to bring about peace than to live by bringing about war? War decimates the innocent and it is tearing this land apart. Would you be a Shah over a ravaged land, a man of blood no better than he who you desire to replace?"

Sureness over took the Satrap. "No...you are right, even if you are a fool! I have wasted too much time here, sounding out my thoughts, trying to justify the bloodshed I thought I couldn't avoid. I will speak and I will speak as the Satrap. If they will not respect me now, I cannot expect them to respect me when I am Shah – how can it be right that I would shed blood for that which I cannot change. I may have to surrender some pride..."

"But is it not worth it to heal the scars of a fresh tyranny, the past Shah may not have been a man of morality but surely no righteous man can abide the rule of Abbas? The rule of might over right? Surely there is some alternative to this?"

"A place where might does not make right!" Toghrol cried, lifting his jewel encrusted scimitar with one arm, straight into the air. "Yes! The path to peace must start with me, almighty Allah be my witness, and it shall be done!" Toghrol looked at the old 8man, an expression of joy in his eyes. "Old man you have earned a place in my heart for opening my eyes to my own foolishness! Once I have secured the peace, I invite you to attend my court. Perhaps there will be a place for you there in the kitchens!"

Kokochu, the age old Master magi of the Babkhans and disciple of Zoroastar, bowed his head, a wry smile upon his face. "I shall make it a point to visit you, O Satrap. I'm sure the kitchens would be a place worthy of my talents."

Toghrol smiled and gave a yelp and then, sword in hand, started running down the path towards his steed and into history.

"Fools! Fiends! Fallacious pigs!" The door of the throne room swung open, and a man entered. It could have been a man, at least. His face was covered with filth and dust. His hair was greasy and was on his head like a thornbush, and his long grey beard nearly touched the floor. His robe, once been brown, was now grey as his beard. It was so thin due wear that there were more holes in it than doors in the palace. Shah Abbas' face turned red: "Who this man?", he shouted, and then to the soldiers, "Remove this man immediately, you lazy barrels of lamp oil! Who was guarding the throne room? I will fry you on the spit; I will pull off your arms and legs one by one! Now, remove this raving creature, so we can proceed with the wedding." To the Sultan of Mestichap, he bowed and apologized: "Excuse me, oh Sultan, for this little inconvenience. I'm sure the ceremonies can continue." he gave a dreadful look to the soldiers. The Sultan answered: "Ah, these soldiers of nowadays, you must tell them everything. They're just like women". He laughed out loud.

Two of the guards stepped forward in order to grab the man and throw him out of the room and into a dungeon. The man however yelled: "Sons of the whores of Satan, don't you know who I am? I am Mahlin, the prophet of Jarass. The wrath of Allah will turn upon you if you touch me." Of course, the soldiers had heard of the prophet of Jarass. The rumours said he was a wise and holy man, who wandered around the country and spread his wisdom, although this man didn't look very wise and holy to the soldiers. They hesitated for a moment; it was a difficult decision, risking the fury of Abbas, or the fury of Allah.

The man used this moment and stepped forward to the king and said: "Proceed, proceed with this marriage if you like. But hear the consequences:", the eyes of the man became white, and a blank expression covered his face "The price of a war is your money. The price of a queen is your life. Choose". Now the soldiers had decided that there was a chance that Allah would show mercy, but the king would never, so they grabbed the old man by his arm and dragged him out of the room. Abbas thought: "this man a prophet? A rambling old man, who lost his senses, that's what he is. Hah, there is no queen, the queen is dead, just as the king. I am the king." An evil smile spread out over his face.

"The marriage will proceed. "Princess Grace was dragged by two guards to a jewelled altar where the Sultan and a mullah stood. "Do you, the Sultan of Mestichap, take Princess Grace to be your loved and cherished wife?" "I do." Do you, Princess Grace take the Sultan of Mestichap to be your loved and cherished husband?" "Nmmmmmmph!" The muffled cry of protest could not be heard by anyone apart from those immediately around the altar. "I now pronounce you husband and wife."

The Sultan raised the Princess's veil and kissed her forehead. "Tomorrow you will join my harem," he whispered in her ear and she stomped hard on his foot in revenge.

As the prophet had made his way to the Mosque, so had crowds of peasants, hearing of the prophecy which had spread fast within the gates of Kamalshahr, throngs of Babkhans fearful of yet another bloody war, had gathered outside the Mosque.

As the guards dragged the old man from the golden doors of the blue tiled Mosque, the crowd surged forward as if to save his life. The Palace Guards rushed outside to quell the insurrection and a bloody riot began to ferment outside the mosque.

Word spread through Kamalshahr that the new Shah had defied the will of Allah. Local clergymen urged the people to march onto the Palaces and demand the freedom of the great Prophet.

Far from Kamalshahr, Sharon had made half her trip from the capital to the Port of Barkat, where she hoped a friendly merchant would take her on to the golden city of Vey.

"By the Might of the Imam, where on this barren earth does a Woman think she can go without her husband?" A local Captain asked Sharon

"May you know that I am married to no other than the lands that i serve good

Captain"

"Ho!" Exclaimed the Captain in a fit of laughter. "And have the lands that you serve granted you permission to sail on my boat?"

"My dear Sir, have you not heard of the riots in Kamalshahr?" Retorted Sharon, "Do you not know that a usurper has taken the crown?"

The Captain's laughter continued as he stroked Sharon's chin "Dear girl, there may be riots and a usurper in Kamalshahr, but I have a ship full of men who smell a woman as rarely as they visit Bath Houses, and no woman without permission will travel on my ship"

"Captain" Exclaimed Sharon in frustration, "What i am to tell you, must never leave your lips"

The Captain glared at Sharon intently, eyes wide and fixed on hers, "Will you tell me that you know of where to seek the Treasures of Alkhvia?" said the Captain with another burst of laughter

"I am a chamber maid to Princess Grace, the daughter of the murdered Shah"

"And i am the son of a Bandit!" Retorted the Captain

"You must take me to Vey, where I will be received by Satrap Narahan, the blood of the Shah has spilt in Kamalshahr and the Usurper can only fall if Narahan's Army crosses the Marzieh Mountains". Said Sharon as she unveiled a large diamond from her purse, "You sir, shall be rewarded kindly for your efforts"

As if forgetting his conviction not to let Sharon on his ship, the Captain reaching for the Diamond spoke, "My lady, we leave sunrise, and I assure you that my crew will behave on the journey to Vey"

The Next day, Sharon set sail for Vey with the greedy Captain.

“And in that time shall great confusion exist in Babkha. The highest lord and the poorest beggar shall both gnash their teeth and wail in fear and distress because they all know not what had become of that which they held dear. The people are vexed, the lawgiver unjustly slain. A new Shah more butcher than king. A coward without faith shall gain his empire approaches so close that I sigh.”by opening the gates to the barbarians – without law he shall bleed the land; his time  
- Prophecy of Omar Moyer, Book of Blood

“The wronged daughter shall, by the wielder of the burning sword, return to reign. Her enemies shall be revealed as conspirators. More than ever shall her time be triumphant, a new empire stretches to very joins between earth and sky.”  
- Revelations of Kokochu.

Kamalshahr's Royal Palaces were a jumble of pavilions, gardens, a mosque with eight minaret towers and the largest dome on the continent, all of which centred on the focus of the three-story palace and its giant courtyard – the Maidan-i-Shah, the daytime bazaar and heart of the capital. However at night the teeming masses were gone and more the pity as this left only Reza Bin Sharif, the commander of the Royal Kapav Guards and abjectly obedient subject of the Shah – the man who had allowed the Razjanian Guards into the palace solely on the authority of the State Seal waved at him by Al-Malik. Darkness saw Reza Bin Sharif, gagged, blindfolded and on his knees, swaying uncertainly in the breeze. Ahead of him in the gloom stood a pair of Sar-Gord's from Razjanian Guards. Both had scowling hate filled faces, behind them a further gaggle of the torch-baring thugs who had similarly disgraced the uniform of Babkha.

“Al-Malik has left this case to our discretion.” The other officer scratched his badly shaved stubble. The pair of them had lean hungry faces and narrow darting eyes that seemed lodged in base of their sockets.

“Hang him instantly” opined one

The next morning in the wake of the riots in Kamalshahr, the usurper Abbas reached a terrible resolution – now faced with the certainty that the people would not accept him as the legitimate claimant to the throne, but rather had begun to plot for the release of the Princess Grace or worse still had begun to credulously follow a prophecy put about by some upstart chieftain from the far West, Abbas inaugurated a criminal act so vile as to stupefy the masses into submission. He knew that among those like himself implicated in the death of Behruz was his defence vizier Dourani and that after himself Dourani was easily the most hated to the conspirators, further more Abbas needed to show that the massacre instigated by the Razjanian guards was an excess carried out on the orders of Dourani not himself.

To that end as dawn rose over the Naqsh-i-Jahan gardens Dourani's severed and headless torso was found strapped to a block of wood with a bloody knife beside it. The hapless and greedy Vizier's head and legs were found wrapped in blood soaked linen floating in the water fountain. The brutality of this spectacle soon drew a crowd but the people who had assembled were at once so stupefied with horror and partly appeased by the satisfactory death of a traitor that all thoughts of plots, coups and prophecies were pushed to the back of their minds.

Thus did Abbas begin to extend his power over the city.

We return to Toghrul as he traversed the fastness of the steppe. The road from the distant land of Zjandaria to Kamalshahr was one that encompassed the lonely fastness of steppe, desert, forest and finally another stretch of rugged steppe. We rejoin our hero at the dawn of that same next day as the bitter cold of the darkest night lifted under the first sunburst. Toghrul had been riding for at least an hour before sunrise. His urgency had been made acute by his urgent need to return to his nobles where he had left them on the edge of the forest. The thin wispy plumes of smoke from the nomads felt tents fluttered like reeds in the blood red morning sky.

The red-haired Satrap Toghrul (Zjandaria had long paid tribute to Babkha in order protect itself against the privations of its more barbarous neighbours) caught sight of a

hunched man on foot a little way ahead. As Toghrul's horse drew ever closer he caught a better view of the man, he was covered in soot and the blackest of torn garments clothed his bodies down to his loins. His occupation was plain from what he wore: he was one who violated the law of the forest to make charcoal for the fires of the traders' caravans and workmen who tended the hunting lodges of the nobles. This figure was aged and weakened by a lifetime of sweat and toil.

Toghrul saw him but could no longer hold him in the contempt that he had formerly held for the common man. The unsettlingly insightful encounter with strange man of the forest had taught him a great deal of the errors in his way.

Toghrul greeted the man kindly and asked him, "Can you tell me if that encampment on yon hill be that of the Zjandarian host?"

The other replied, "I know not who they be but I knew them to be foreigners, otherwise I would not have gone to them with charcoal to sell if they were nobles of my own country."

The Satrap said, "So my dear fellow, if you took your wares to sell to these fellows you must know something, a little, of them?"

"Master," said the peasant, "all I know is that I delivered fuel for their fires and only demanded a modest price yet they refused to pay even a quarter of what I asked."

"Scoundrels," said Toghrul.

"In complete truth master," grumbled the peasant, "they took my donkey as well and shot it full of arrows for sport." The peasant continued his remonstrance; "they drove me out of camp with taunts and laughter and waving firebrands lit from my own charcoal fires."

"Allah's teeth man, if these vile creatures are my subjects there will be hell to pay. Come good fellow ride with me and we shall establish the truth of this matter."

The peasant gladly obeyed and accepted the Satrap's hand up onto the back of the horse. "Master I do pray to Allah that these men are not of your nation for no man as good as you deserves such followers."

With that the unlikely pair rode on towards the encampment.

Busily scuffling around the foyer of the Willithian Senate, representatives from the nations that had long ago formed the Willith Union frantically gathered inside the marble building.

The city of Neudalls, the farthest known city to the west, on the coast of the great Euran continent, had been forever a mystery to the Babkhans. Only one Shah had stepped foot in its limestone streets and entered the famed marble buildings of the largest empire known to the entire continent. Behruz II, the murdered Shah, had so many years earlier ventured there, having conquered the vastness of Vipia, his empire was slowly yet surely encroaching towards the western lands that were always known to Babkha as that of the Willith.

The Shah had sought to forge an alliance to drive the Emans from their seat of power to the north of Vipia, however what he found was a Yengisian Countess. Yengisia, the most powerful of all the nations of Willithia, had given Shah Behruz a love that was unthinkable, Margarete of Welsdale returned with the Shah to Kamalshahr to bear him his only child. The Princess was named in honour of the Willith lands from where she came, Grace.

In Neudalls, news of the events in the strange lands to the east emerged. The Williths, ever fearful of Mestechap power and the Barbarians whom the Mestechaps controlled along the Unions southern frontier, were worried of a Mestechap push north after securing a peace with Babkha.

The Williths had wars on every frontier to contend with, just south of Neudalls a large wall had been erected decades earlier to prevent the spread of Uzbek power, which had relentlessly driven the Williths from northern Uzbenia. To the East, the Spartanians had grown strong, while the Mestechaps and Kels of the south had grown to immense power.

"Kelestan has plundered our trading caravans, the Emans have murdered our travellers, the Uzbeks have destroyed vast amounts of the Southern wall, do we now let the Mestechaps grow and resist our power also?" Roared the Willith Consul as the Senators took their seats

"The Princess of Babkha, a Willith has been given to their Sultan" He continued as the assembly murmured amongst themselves

"With that, the Babkhans have bought peace and peace with Babkha for Mestechap means resources to plunder Willithia"

The Senators murmurs continued to grow

"And what of Civil war in the Eastern lands Consul" Shouted a grey bearded Ostrisian Senator "What of the envoy that has reached us?"

"The envoy that you speak of, is an escaped Guard from the Kapav Guards, the protectors of the Kapav Dynasty in Kamalshahr" Continued the Consul, "The Kapav who has travelled weeks to reach us, has brought with him a message from his murdered General"

The Senators sat in silence as they awaited the Envoys message

"The Message was from a fellow named Bin Sharif, he had been under orders from his King, who had suspicions of his Grand Vizier, that upon his death, the Willithians are to be contacted to assist his daughter to claim the crown"

"And if we don't?" Cried a young Senator

"Then Mestechap and the new King of the Babkhans shall form an alliance and who knows what such an alliance could mean for our empire" Continued the Consul

"I have dispatched a small band of elite warriors to capture the princess as she travels through Vipia en route to Mestechap"

The silence shattered as the Senators roared, some shouted their displeasure while others voiced their support. Whatever was to happen, the Willith's were to become intertwined with Babkhan history and with the shaping of the infant continent.

The Willith were famed across the continent for the skill and zeal of their soldiers – the fidawis were famed for their ability to adopt the customs and language of any land through which they passed. Thus the Fidawis especially carried within them the potent combination of zeal and inscrutability that made them so dangerous to anyone who opposed them in their mission.

The Willith senate on the other hand was hardly the most discreet of public forums and amongst its delegates were those who favoured the abject appeasement of the Mestechap-Babkhan axis.

Princess Grace had endured several days and nights of pure misery. By day she had been forced to sing for her new husband which wasn't that bad. He was an unpleasant fellow who ate like an animal and liked to give Grace sloppy kisses with her hands bound so she couldn't wipe them off.

The nights were the worst. He would rape her over and over again and give her a black eye as she struggled. She had the knife passed to her by Sharon and she was waiting for the chance to kill the Sultan and escape to Willithia with her life. Everyday she was taken closer and closer to Mestechap and her chances of escape grew thinner. Many times she cried when she remembered her murdered father and there were times when she wished that she could join him in death.

Abbas, 'The Great Pretender' as those dissidents who still had the use of their tongues were wont to call him, stood on the Coronation Balcony of the Royal Palace, resplendent in the very same regal finery that the old Shah had worn on the last night of his life. This was Abbas' exquisite moment of absolute triumph. He was Shah now; no power on earth could alter that fact. Below him in the Maidan-i-Shah stirred the fearful servile citizenry of Kamalshahr. To his left a bribed Imam exhorted the sullen crowd to ever-greater zeal in service Abbas 'the Great.' The crowd, perfectly aware of the phalanxes of Razjanian archers and flame-pot throwers patrolling the flat sun-baked rooftops of the bazaar and the horde murderous thugs pent up in the back streets, cheered dutifully and waved standards proclaiming Abbas to be the Mahdi, 'the expected one.'

Abbas was no fool, he knew the crowd below hated him and would have stormed the palace at the drop of a hat if it was not for the powerful opiate of force and terror – which he and his allies alone had recourse to. His allies, not his subjects; Al-Malik Lenk (Malik the Lame) may have been born into this world as the unwanted son of a potter and a prostitute and he may have spent his early years as a sheep-rustler, bandit, petty racketeer and pimp, but he was the commander of the Razjanians now – the sole pillar on which Abbas rested his criminal regime. The Sultan of Mestechap may have departed west with that Willith slut Grace but a garrison of Mestechapans remained in Kamalshahr to ensure the axis and put down any revolt. Privately Abbas was in terror of the prospect that Al-Malik might sell out to his allies. However for now Al-Malik was a friend. Such a valued friend that he had been given the singular privilege of

being brought out onto the Coronation Balcony to witness the magic that the potent combination of hatred and terror had weaved on the cheering crowd below where not a single sincere note of adulation could be heard for all the cacophony of beating drums blaring trumpets, clashing cymbals and endless cheering.

‘Abbas! Abbas! Abbas! All merciful! All knowing wise father of the people!’

Al-Malik at Abbas’ right hand could reflect on the success of the terror. Jet-black Razjanian jail-carts trundled the back streets of Kamalshahr scooping up any unfortunate who caught out in the streets after curfew. They were never especially discerning during the daytime either. Most Razjani soldiers were what might be charitably described as borderline psychotic. One jail-cart trundling along at break neck speed through the Naqsh-i-Jahan had crushed a three-year old girl under its spoke wheels. The soldiers had been seen laughing hysterically at this. The result perhaps inevitably had been another riot. There had been perhaps a riot every two days in the five weeks since the coup, the butcher job he had carried out on Dourani had only stifled the anger of the people briefly, and every new and greater act of terror had a shorter shelf life. This latest riot had been serious, not even flaming pots of naphtha hurled into the enraged mob had dispersed it. In the end the Mestechap garrison had to be called into to crush the riot. After that incident Al-Malik decided to bring the entire Razjanian Regiment in to protect the Royal Palace. The slums of the old town had been abandoned tonight to provide enough protection for the Shah during his foolish rally. Even then he was not sure whether it would be enough. One stray arrow if it hit the Shah could start a revolution. To be sure Al-Malik had plans to fight his way out of the city if the worse came to the worse but he did not fancy his chances.

Abbas leaned over to his untrustworthy lieutenant, “I think we might pull this one off without having to butcher any of the cattle.” The term ‘cattle’ was Abbas’ favourite euphemism for all the common people he despised so much. One gem of conversation Al-Malik remembered came immediately to mind, ‘the people are like cattle. We only care for the herd because we want the choicest cut of the finest meat.’ That had always amused Al-Malik, ever since he first knew Abbas’ as Grand Vizier.

“Your majesty may be certain in this. The crowd seems to be accepting its role in the order of things highness, but a single well-aimed arrow majesty and...”

Abbas waved his hand dismissively, “We will have nothing to fear for tonight. Obviously plenty of the herd would like to strike a blow for their bovine freedom but they will never get close, there is no one in this city that can strike a blow against me. All the regiments where we do not have our men in the top jobs are either out trying to keep a lid on things in the provinces or have been disarmed.” Al-Malik’s eyebrow arched, “I dare say there is not a force on this continent that has the power or inclination to act against us.” Now in full view of the crowd the two traitors gave each other the heartfelt embrace of a pair of brigands... neither felt they would keep faith with each other once they had fully secured their positions.

The creaky rocking that Sharon had endured was near its end, the wooden vessel that was her home for so many weeks was near its destination as above her atop the sail mast, the young boy sailor shouted as the gleaming minarets of the coastal City of Vey, known for centuries as the Golden City, drew nearer.



The city was as ancient as time immortal, it had seen the days of the Pur and the Dehtians, it had been burnt to a crisp as the two fought there bloody war. Vey's sparkling minarets and golden domes were rebuilt time and time again, the great Kings of early Babkha knew its important position, cradling the Babkhan Gulf and the Marzieh mountains it was an important trading route for merchants who arrived at its shining port from all over the known lands. Chelpian traders with opals shining blue from those northern mines haggled with Tatanian Bazaaris as the Mosque's called the faithful to prayer.

Sharon awoke to the boys call, and saw before her a spectacle she had only heard of. Kamalshahr's dusty, busy streets were no match for the crisp ocean blue and the golden reflections of the sun beaming from hundreds of golden domes.

As the ship drew closer she, a Willith who had only seen the Palaces of Kamalshahr, could not have envisioned the difference between this golden world and the marble edifices of her childhood home.

"By Allah, my soldiers have been returned from Kamalshahr, Abbas Shah has ordered them out of the hallowed city, what this handmaiden speaks cannot be false, this Shah is a usurper" Spoke Sharoud, the Parestani Sarhang.

"I am Satrap of a province that has not produced warriors for the empire for centuries, we are poets, we cannot fight a war" Responded Narahan

"Let me speak my master" Interrupted Sharon as she approached the jewel encrusted seat of the Satrap.

"From all reports, Kamalshahr is awash with blood, women and children are being murdered, The Great Shah Behruz did not crush Bahram the Grim only to let our cities fall unto such distress"

The door of the hall flung open and there stood a tall Alkhvian man, with the great Alkhvian long sword by his side, the figure strode forward

"I am Khalifeh of the Alkhvians, the dead Shah had once murdered my people when we sided with his brother so many years earlier, but now without reason and without sanity, again a Shah of Kapav has not only massacred our people, but our children as well".

All in the hall sat stunned and silent as the tall burly man strode on to greet Narahan, his thick black beard typical of the Northerners who had long been rebellious to Kamalshahr. "I escaped with my life, and a band of my loyal soldiers, soldiers loyal to the Babkhans who have caused us such great suffering"

"What happened in Alkhvia good Khalife?" Asked Narahan

"There was a riot when news of the Shah's demise reached us, the people saw it as a chance to be free of the Babkhan yolk, yet within days, half the cities lay empty, the new Shah had ordered a massacre of all first born sons. Their mothers watched in

horror as child by child was strung upon street lamps throughout our land"

"And what has brought you here to Vey?"

"We all know that you, Satrap Narahan was loyal to the Shah, we do not seek to leave the great empire, we seek to return it to peace, my men, there are thousands awaiting me outside the city gates will march on to Kamalshahr if needs be"

"My masters" Interrupted Sharon again "The Princess is on her way to Mestechap, she is the rightful heir of the throne of Kapav, she must be saved"

The sudden appearance of a handmaid and an Alkhvian warlord had made it clear to the Satrap, his duty lay in saving the empire from the clutches of an evil man.

"The Razjanians are strong, they are trained for war from birth and cannot be defeated so easily. The late Shah had taken his brothers fortress in Kamaltoon with the Razjanians, they are brought up motherless and have the heart of a barren desert stone" Spoke Sarhang Sharoud

"In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate, we shall rescue the Princess, if this nation is to fall to bloody civil war once more then it shall be the price we pay" Declared the Satrap

Narahan was a smart insightful man, and had remained a step in front of Shah Abbas, he despatched envoys to loyal provinces to join the rebellion. The golden city was fortified to protect it from the Shahs forces while the secret emissaries spread into every corner of the Kingdom.

Slowly, the rebellion was taking shape, hidden in the darkest nights, the best warriors from around the nation were to be assembled in the Golden city.

Perhaps five weeks had past, perhaps four, Toghrul could still remember with a searing bitterness the betrayal. Perhaps it had been the return of the conned charcoal merchant that had proved the last straw for the Zjandarian nobles – those shallow capricious creatures who could have the affront to call themselves men. As Toghrul knelt over the charcoal burners nameless grave he reflected bitterly that those traitors must have been plotting against from the very moment they crossed the border into Babkha, how convenient it would be for the Ilkhans to return to Zjandaria with the 'sad hateful news' that their 'beloved' young Satrap had met his death in an ambush at some nameless location in a scarcely known corner of the world.

"How tragic!" The sour disaffected young man muttered under his breath crouched, with his left arm hung in a blood soaked sling, over the grave of the nameless peasant who had in that final day of his life shown more loyalty to a stranger than all Toghrul's nobility had given their rightful ruler for his entire lifetime.

With a blinding thud unseen hands delivered the first blow.

He failed to notice his assailants as they creped up on him with an almost spectral silence.

Princess Grace could take no more. After many days in the foul clutches of the Mestechap Sultan she was going to escape. She lay in bed with his bulk snoring next to her. It had been two minutes since he fell asleep and she could still feel his wet kisses all over her face.

Her hands and feet were bound to the bedposts and a gag covered her mouth. She was however, able to slide the knife out from under the pillow where she had hidden it a week ago.

She cut the bonds and then put her hand over the mouth of the Sultan who had delighted in using her body despite her pleas for mercy.

Now she would show him none. With her other hand she drove the knife into his body over and over again. When his stifled screams ceased and he lay in a pool of blood she cut out his heart and cut off his private parts. "Another soul is now in Hell," she thought. Two guards were at the entrance to the tent, so she cut her way out with the bloodstained knife through the tent wall.

She pulled out a tent peg and crept out in the moonlight. Two huge dogs, Meschapien Jawhounds, so called because of the size of their jaws, faced her. If she had tried to escape earlier they would have savaged her. But now they had got to know and like her. She stroked the brown and orange backs and dropped the heart into the salivating jaws of one. The fierce dog tore it to bits and then to the other Grace fed the Sultan's severed testicles as well, the monstrous creature showed no hesitation in devouring the most intimate part of its former master.

They did not bark as she sneaked up and knocked out a guard with the tent peg. She took his sword and stole a fast Meschapien stallion and rode as fast as she could towards the borders of Willithia.

The next day saw the beginning of a flurry of proclamations. All of which were prompted by Abbas Shah's alleged discovery of 'a lamentable thing, an outrage too horrible to contemplate, a detestable crime', in a city where every day brought forth wails of lamentation from the newly bereaved, victims of regime based on detestable crime, this would have to be something special. It was perhaps a new chapter in the deranged tyranny. The Shah's minions did not disappoint, the nature of the revelation became apparent over the course of the day.

Kamalshahr was a cosmopolitan city; it was host to a veritable cross-fertilisation of faiths and cultures. It was home to 14000 Nestorian Christians, the largest single Christian community in Babkha. Also there was a well-established Zoroastrian quarter in the old town – a conglomeration of decaying centuries old abandoned villas and palaces which the 25000 Zoroastrians had portioned out amongst themselves to the envy of the Muslim residents of the sprawling slums that had engulfed the area.

The day after the rally no Razjanian guards or their jail-carts were to be seen treading the open sewers that served as roads in the Old Town. Instead more bribed Mullahs were seen visiting district after district. At each mosque where they stopped the message they delivered spread waves of horror and revulsion across an already brutalised population.

At the Sarhang Gate mosque Tughtikin, a lay preacher, espoused the states message to

the faithful with the zeal of a poor man suddenly made rich.

“Let no man among you doubt that the infidels within our cities have made a pact to destroy Islam. By the Prophet let no man doubt this fact lest they too succumb to the conspiracy of the idolaters.”

The crowd disturbed from their devotions by the demagogues oratory waxed cynical. “How much has Abbas paid you o babblers?”

Scornful laughter echoed among the mosques pristine marble arches. From somewhere in the crowd a shoe was thrown, the ultimate insult.

From atop of the pulpit, Tughtikin fulminated against the crowd, “I do this not for Abbas Shah, I care nothing for his money” he lied, “but I tell you this the Shah’s hand has been forced in these matters of late. The Razjanian atrocities have been provoked by the Christians.”

The murmurs in the crowd grew angry now.

“That child run down by the dog-faced murderers was a Moslem. Do not tell me that the Razjanians have only been fighting the enemies of Islam. Those motherless shits have been waging a war on all of us for Abbas while you’ve earned your blood money spreading their lies!”

Tughtikin was beginning to sweat now, the audience would not be won over by words alone, the past weeks were too bitter for the official line to be swallowed. It was time for the ‘stage props’ to be brought in. To give the signal the deceiver waved the Koran with his left hand twice. On queue a grizzled old man stumbled in with the lifeless body of an 18-month-old baby, its throat had been cut. The crowd surged to the old man and the lifeless infant. His lines well rehearsed the old man began. “O Islam! Look what they have done, look what they have done, savages! Cannibals!”

Shock and horror overtook the crowd. Some who knew the man but not his pact with the devil spoke up first.

“Al-Adil what has happened? Who did this? Was it the soldiers?” The old man acting like a pro was sobbing, “No, no, no, it was the Zoroastrians, and on my very life I saw it all. The Qadi judge sent his men into one of the old villas, they found babies, hundreds of babies, there was chaos, blood everywhere, children crying – the screams, the blood, the Fire Altar dripping in blood. They were sacrificing the babes. Oh Allah I can not bare this burden no more.” The old man collapsed to the floor the lifeless corpse still firmly gripped in his embrace, just as he had agreed with the Qadi and Tughtikin when the payment had been made. This was what had been needed scepticism and incredulity dropped away only to be replaced by hatred and hysteria. The cry went up.

“By Allah this will not go un-avenged. Those bastards, their heads will build towers when we have torn them from their filthy pork eating bodies. They will pay.” As if by magic another voice as if in tune with the new spirit and remembering or inventing some ludicrous atrocity story joined in. “I hear the Christians are planning to poison the city wells.”

Yet another, “You know Dourani was in the pay of the infidels when he killed the Shah that’s why Abbas had him cut apart.” “I heard this Satrap from Zjandaria was a pagan, the peasants who are waiting for him are no better than Zoroastrians. Lets kill them all.” “Come lets burn the churches.” Some eyes turned to Tughtikin. The crowd now in a frenzy of hate needed a guide to focus them onto the right target. The man knew well how to play the crowd now. This was how he earned his bread.

“Are you not men? Are you not true sons of the prophet?” The answer went up with a roar, “Yes. Yes. We are.”

“Are you not Ghazi? Are you not warriors of the faith? Again, “Yes. O Allah Yes.”  
“Will you not wage jihad against the infidels who have committed these atrocities?”  
“Yes.”

“Will you accept Abbas as your Mahdi? Will you put all behind you and crush his enemies like the heretics they are?”

“Yes.” Unhesitating, unthinking, the mob had just sold its soul to its tormentor in a quest to drown its sorrows in a further torrent of blood.

“Then go, let no unbeliever live amongst you from this day forth.”

The crowd began to pour out of the mosque onto the streets where the flames from the burning Zoroastrian quarter were already visible.

As the last worshipers departed, the old man stepped away from the child’s corpse and beamed a broad smile at the Lay Preacher. Tughtikin in reply tossed a bag of thirty silver coins down to the old man who caught them in his blood stained hands.

Tughtikin dropped the mosque Koran to the floor and kicked it down the stairs of the pulpit.

‘Only four more districts to cover old man.’

"Narahan, the Sultan is dead, our Queen is not to be found" Spoke the envoy "I have seen the carnage with my own eyes"

"Has the Princess been killed?" Asked the Burly Alkhvian Khalifeh

"By the goodness of Ahura Mazda, she is not found, I fear she has been captured by a Barbarian tribe, there is no telling what has become of her"

Then Narahan, who had sat still and attentive as the envoy had announced his news weighed in "Gentlemen, there is much to be feared, with or without our Queen, the lands are burning up, the Muslims and Zoroastrians in all corners of the Kingdom savage each other like Tigers" His brow furrowed, the Parestani lamented

"Your Magnificence, another band of soldiers awaits outside the city walls, Muslims who have fled the Zoroastrian uprising in Susa" Spoke a Guard

Since the unveiling of Abbas's plot to divide and rule, village after village, town after town and province after province had been slowly infected with the madness of intolerance. The Muslims of Kapav, Razjania and Dehvaz had ravaged the Fire Temples of Zoroaster, while the northern lands of Susa, Norasht and Hashemia had seen Muslims persecuted by the majority Zoroastrians.

The new Shah had played into Narahan's hands and ignored the Golden City "A city of poets needs no attention" he declared to his Generals

While unbeknown to him, quietly, slyly, the best of each regiment was sent to the Golden gates of Vey to await the return of the Princess. Daily, bands of elite soldiers would await the Satrap; on one occasion the spies of Abbas crossing the Mountain ranges into Babkha proper had spotted an entire legion of Tatanian Axemen. Feigning a Tatanian rebellion, the Axemen gave up their lives and marched against the Imperial Army of Babkha. Their leader knew that if his men were not sacrificed there, there would be a slaughter in Vey.

"Allow them in, they will be kept at the ruined Purian Barracks, make what repairs you can for their arrival and give them plain clothes to wear" ordered Narahan

"My fellow Babkhan" Interrupted a Bolfil General "Word has it that Abbas's rampages in Kamalshahr have dried up his coffers"

"The better, he will have no money to wage war" Shouted a turbaned Vipian

"In Bolfilestan, there is an old saying ...if a man cannot afford his home then onto Vey for a golden dome"

"And in Vipia, we leave the rhyming to the women" Sneered the Vipian

"But if the Shah has no gold in his coffers... then the golden city can refill them, can it not?" Continued the Bolfil

"By Allah!" Shouted Narahan "He will send his hordes here for our gold, the Sarhang speaks it right"

"My Lord" Stepped in the emissary "This may not be the right time, but as I heard at the Sultans camp, a band of Williths were spotted nearby shortly after he was killed"

"What in the name of Imam Hussein are the Williths doing so close to our lands?" Asked Narahan, stunned by the possible implications "They would not risk their borders to assassinate a Sultan"

"The Princess is of Willith stock, perhaps they would rather see a thousand weeks of war than to let one of their own fall into such vile hands" Interrupted the Bolfil

"Even so, Behruz Shah had long spoken with me of the Willith, they are not a people to risk war over such small things... their empire is large enough without Mestechap, there is something more in it" Said Narahan as he paced around the room

"Between Abbas, the slaughtering in our lands, the Princess disappearance and now the Williths, I fear I may not sleep with such strange happenings in this earth"  
Lamented Narahan

The Court of the Satrap of Parestan, so usually a lonely quiet place had by now become awash with talk, full of Generals, Satraps and other nobles from around the lands. Narahan was a great man, a wise leader of wise men, but he was no soldier, and certainly no King. Without the Princess, he could not march on Kamalshahr.

"Then send three envoys to Willithia, this may take months and upon their return we could all be dead" Decided Narahan "The road to the Williths is long and treacherous, each envoy will take a different route" As he spoke the murmurings in the court became a sully silence "You, Vipian" Narahan moved forward pointing at the Vipian General "Your people are of desert stock, select your best scout. He shall take the desert route to the west"

With that, the Vipian strode out of the room, proud of his peoples hardiness.

"You, Susan" pointed Narahan to the Susan Guard who had only walked into the room minutes earlier "Your people are accustomed to the forests are they not?"

"Yes by Allah they are... but we only just..."

"Stop" Interrupted Narahan "Your archers are famed across the empire, do you have any with you?"

"My lord, the Greatest Archers in all of Eura have come to this fine city" Spoke the Susan

"Then, select a band of no more than five, they shall be the second envoy, I will send them through the northern lands, into the wooded forests of Chelpia and north from Omenia and onto Willithia"

As the Susan marched out to prepare his men, a short bearded man stepped up "Good Satrap, let the Third Envoy go by sea, I am from Port Mehdie, we have a dhow that can make the journey to Willithia. On foot it takes months, by sea it is a weeks journey"

"The Southern sea's are stormy, a weak Kapav ship cannot handle that" Yelled an overweight Niloufariyan man "Only boats from Niloufariyeh can make such a trip"

After a short pause the bearded Sailor retorted "If you had of let me finish, our vessel is Niloufariyan, she is battle hardy good Satrap, we have defeated pirates off the Leilish coast for our beloved Shah many a time"

"Our beloved late Shah you mean" Said Narahan. The Sailor nodded mournfully, "I could have meant none other."

After a short pause Narahan smiled.

"Then I am convinced, let the third envoy take to the seas"

With that, the envoys were given there messages and each set off on there journeys. Narahan ordered that the golden domes of the Mosques of Vey be painted over in black. He hoped such a simple trick could keep Abbas away, if his greed brought him into the poets land.

"Wake up, wake up! Damned cur. Osric I swear on my life I'll get no joy from this one, he's sick at heart and no use to us."

"Stand too lad, how much sense would I have got from you if I had subjected you to a beating like that?"

"I could hardly have asked him to come quietly could I now?"

"You didn't have to beat the seven shades out of him! His arms in a sling lad how much of a fight do you think he could have put up? After the blood loss, the fatigue and your beating it's a marvel he's still alive."

And yet he was, almost all resemblance to his familiar shape and form had been beaten out of his face that was now an assortment of mottled blue and black swellings and bruises. Stunned, dazed and hardly able to see anything more than the blurry out line of images, Toghrul followed up with an inevitable question.

“Who the hell are you?”

“By Jove he’s come too. Flavian get back here, he’s come too.”

“Who the hell are you already?” the delirious Satrap reiterated.

“We are the Fidawis of Willith now who the hell are you?”

“Kerim Bey! Kerim Bey!” The portly Zjandarian Ilkhan disengaged his slobbering mouth from the roast chicken he had been greedily devouring. This man interrupted from his greatest passion was not best pleased. Some non-descript subaltern had appeared from nowhere, his head peering through the flap entrance of his musty smoke filled tent. “Lord sir, there’s a man who has ... just ... appeared in camp sir.”

Kerim was not going to get up or abate from gorging himself just for that ‘gem’ of news. “Well, damn it for the life of me man, who is he, what does he want.” As he waited none to attentively for an answer Kerim took another bite of juicy succulent meat.

“Err, his names Kokochu, and you won’t believe this but he really did just appear.”

A masticated piece of flesh was spat on to the fire. “Kokochu?” Kerim repeated the word over again as if it lessened the shock, “Kokochu?” The soldier noticed the appalled look of disbelief on the Ilkhans face and, evidently fearing that Kerim ‘the Grim’ had taken a disliking to him, edged nervously away from the felt tent flap. The Ilkhan sprang off the lounging furs with an agility not normally associated with someone of his corpulent disposition. The partially devoured chicken dropped to the floor, a mongrel appeared from some unseen recess and snatched it away unnoticed.

“Kokochu? The prophet? The Babkhan Magi is here in my camp?” Kerim lunged forward and grabbed the lackey by his loose homespun tunic, “is this the Kokochu of which you speak!?” The soldier pissed himself, a puddle of stinking urine was forming at the base of the hapless mans fur boots. “I, I, I... err, by the gods I couldn’t imag...”

“He means I am the one of whom you just spoke.” Kokochu the lame hobbling old man, wrapped in furs and rags edged forward towards the mighty Ilkhan. Kerim threw the soldier who was still busy soiling himself to the ground. The exasperated Ilkhan wiped a greasy hand over his sweating face. “Soldier could you not even manage to place a guard on this man?”

“Oh leave the boy be. He did his best, those four chaps he had watching me were a pretty tough bunch, tell me do you recruit purely by the density of a man’s cranium? cause those fellows took some hard knocks I’ll tell you.”



Kerim drew a hideously long curved knife from his cummerbund. "I'm doubt the need to fear of you old man, your reputation means nothing to me."

The old man was distinctly unimpressed. "Is that so?" The Magi tapped his hobbling stick against the ground. The Ilkhan's knife flew out of his hand, and straight into the jugular of the hapless soldier whose life was now over save the gurgling of blood and the futile act of rasping for every last breath of air. The soldier collapsed into the mud, which was soon saturated in a crimson tide. Kerim Bey was shaking uncontrollably now.

The Magi smiled, "poor lad, picked the wrong outfit to serve in." Kokochu turned his eyes back to Kerim and with another tap of the hobbling stick blood began to well up in Kerim's eyes. Screaming, the Ilkhan held his hands to his ears as if he was trying to contain the pressure as all the blood of his body rushed to his head. He stood like that for a minute, then with his voice reduced to but a whimper he collapsed prostrate to the floor. Now with the old man towering above him, the over mighty subject had been reduced to abject submission. "Now." Kokochu continued, "There are two people of some importance to me who you shall help me find. Can I count on your assistance?"

The Ilkhan nodded feebly, "Very good Kerim Bey, now firstly there is a girl of Willith stock who I believe is being held somewhere in this camp. You will release her and give her over to me. Secondly there is your former lord and master who, I am given to understand, you have been rather disrespectful to of late. You will lead me to him also. Moreover until I give you permission to quit these lands, you your peers and your followers shall adhere to my every wish or you know what you can expect more of." Again Kerim nodded.

"Hmm, I think I shall begin with a bath. I've had far too many people this century commenting on my body odour. 'Smells like a goat' huh!"

Kerim Bey, still wheezing for breath kowtowed to the vile wizard. "But master we have no such woman here."

The Magi glanced down scornfully, "is that so? And what of your young Satrap, perhaps you know nothing of him also?"

The grovelling Ilkhan glanced up fleetingly, "No master I know where he is... or I did," Kerim kept his face down in the blood soaked mud and filth, "I had my retainers trail Toghrul back into the forest. The boy was badly injured, the men were closing in on him, and he was finished."

The sage nodded, "but?"

"We found the scouting party a day later, all dead, they had all been..." The Ilkhan gestured the motion of throat slitting "was it you who did this?"

"No it was hardly I Kerim Bey, if I had saved Toghrul from your assassins I would hardly be asking you for his whereabouts now would I? But go on, there was something else you were going to say."

"Yes, one thing, they err they had all had their hearts cut out."

The Magi played with a strand of his matted greasy hair.

"Hmm, the Fidawis, most curious, the Willith Senate must have taken an interest in their little whore of a Princess. Why else would they have unleashed the Fidawis so far from home? Interesting, I never foresaw this."

"Forgive me master I think I know not of what you speak."

"Oh no Kerim Bey there's no need for forgiveness, indeed the fact you seldom think is one of your most redeeming features."

Allah, in his infinite mercy, had been good to Abbas Shah of late, for Allah, with His immeasurable grace had delivered the people into his hands. The pogrom against the Zoroastrian Quarter had stoked up the fires of hatred across the Kingdom; the long suppressed and ancient mutual loathing between Zoroastrians and Muslims had exploded into a vengeful jihad. All this was well and good, although his influence had collapsed in the Northern provinces where the adherents of Zoroastar were now in open revolt, Abbas Shah now found himself at the head of an army of fanatics which had been raised at no cost to the state whatsoever. As far as Abbas was aware this was a singularly unique achievement. Better yet, by invoking himself as the Mahdi, Abbas had tapped into the apocalyptic under currents that moved the foul smelling masses', the Satraps and Arteshbod's and Sarhangs were all now squarely pressed between his thumb and the fists of the mobs that roved the countryside. Defections had trailed off. Most Satraps were by now paying homage. The disappearance of small bands fighting men from the regular army was of no interest when the Mahdist host was daily growing into a horde.

The army of ghazi's assembled and encamped in and around Kamalshahr were being financed by donations from the Mullahs and the sale of confiscated Zoroastrian property, but this last source was now drying up. The Razjanians had been set to work extorting contributions from the Nestorian Bishops and the rest of the cowering Christian community, when they had no more money to give they too would be exterminated to please the faithful.

Abbas Shah considered himself a cruel man, but nor did he any longer take the same delight in the wanton slaughter that had marked his rise from the provinces to the post of Grand Vizier or the coup by which he had gained the throne. He was a ruler now, and cruelty was a weapon of rulers. So too was mercy, but any ruler who could not be cruel would not rule long. Even the Old Shah had been cruel in his war against his brother, a man Abbas had secretly admired, and Behruz, more famous for his gardens, had celebrated victory with the construction of a tower of decapitated heads.

However in striking the deal that brought the Mullahs over firmly to his side, the forces that had been unleashed turned the minorities firmly against him, once more it was time to unleash a murderous spectacle on the people of Kamalshahr. This spectacle would be of such murderous barbarism that would send a shudder of horror through the disloyal. While driving his new Taliban party into raptures of delight. It was once more time to let his enemies know, and Abbas knew that a desperate band of plotters was gathering somewhere, that the price of treason was death.

Treason was very loosely defined these days. An ‘amicable loan’ had been extorted from the Nestorian Bishops, and their entire congregation was obliged to ‘lend’ ninety thousand rials, four times the pre-coup revenue of the state. The inevitable failure to comply made the Christian community the bondmen of the local Qadi judges. Some Nestorians tried to spirit away their wealth to the rebel North where the Shahs’ taxmen had either been expelled or flayed alive. One in particular, a merchant who in this case was a man who dealt in common metals, was discovered to be smuggling gold out to the coastal City of Vey. It was like trying to sell swords to a blacksmith as Al-Malik had commented; Vey was a city of almost legendary wealth, a gleaming metropolis of golden domes, the precious metal was hardly in short supply in that part of the world. However Vey was an island of tranquillity in the storm that beat about the Kingdom and worse still the regional Satrap was ambiguous in his loyalty. Not in open revolt and yet unforthcoming with any gesture of loyalty.

Needless to say the merchant in question was to be punished for the smuggling of taxable goods, but to give the spectacle a more pointed message a Nestorian cleric from the merchants’ district was also arrested. Both now awaited His Majesties pleasure and were standing in the hot sand of the Maidan-i-Shah, guarded by two muscular Mestechaps.

The beleaguered commander of the Mestechap garrison in Kamalshahr was out on a limb in a foreign and hostile country, his homeland was in disorder with the murder of its Sultan - news that had hit everyone like a thunderclap. Alone and vulnerable Emir Naigadin had offered his services to Al-Malik, who dutifully had passed the offer to Abbas who readily accepted. As a token of good will Abbas had been presented with specimens of Mestechap soldiery who had developed their muscles to an extraordinary degree as a manifestation of their faith, an almost pagan interpretation that Abbas did not much care for, but they were allies and he had hired the two barbarians to entertain and serve him but also they served as the instructors of the people in obedience. They provided a novelty horror act, and at the execution today they would perform an act that would pass into Babkhan folklore.

The two brutes stood beneath the Coronation Balcony, stripped to their waists and with their vast chests oiled so that their tanned brown muscles glistened in the late-morning sun.

Abbas Shah came from the pretence of his prayers out onto the balcony, where the now genuinely reverential crowds applauded him. After all for them was not the Mahdi? The man who had saved the capital from chaos and revolution through his firm leadership, the fact he had been the root cause of the blood-drenched chaos had by and by been forgotten or suppressed in the minds of the mob.

Out on the balcony Al-Malik, Naigadin, and now also Tughtikin, greeted Abbas Shah as the Mahdi before the eyes of the assembled warriors, the dupes, and the condemned. Tughtikin was a relative unknown to Abbas, this lay-preacher who had with his travelling blood soaked passion play drawn the sceptical Muslims of the capital into a war of mutual extermination with their infidel neighbours.

“Tughtikin.” Abbas beckoned his arch-propagandist to his side, “You have been much

in our thoughts lately with your good works.”

The rabble-rouser bowed, “If I have been of service to your majesty, those services rendered have been their own reward.” Abbas chuckled at the answer. At thirty bags of silver for every district that was sucked into the jihad riots the services rendered had indeed been their own reward. “I am pleased that you have found it so. Tell me have the Qadi’s covered in full the expenses of your virtuous activities? A man as dedicated as yourself is entitled to some small remuneration.”

“Indeed so O Shah, for the virtues of my deeds I have been well rewarded, yet of great hardship and distress was it for me to alert the faithful to the cause of Allah, but... virtue is its own reward.” the shrewd greedy man trailed off awaiting the Shah’s reply.

And the Shah was most impressed with Tughtikin’s avarice. “Rest assured that for those hardships which you have suffered in my service you shall be justly compensate.” As such there was truly honour amongst thieves, Abbas Shah and Tughtikin smiled slyly at their newly formed understanding. Al-Malik and Naigadin exchanged hesitant glances.

Abbas Shah who was gaudy in his yellow silk tunic and red turban beckoned his lieutenants to join him in watching the demise of the condemned.

“Tughtikin, may I have faith in you?”

“Have faith in me sire as you would see fit.”

Abbas grinned malevolently, “Gentlemen I am sure that you are eager to watch the crushing of those infidels bones, but I first will have some business to discuss with Tughtikin. Tarry here a while, I shall instruct the Chamberlain to torture the traitors for you and the crowds delectation first.”

The Shah retired inside with his demagogue. The balcony shutters were closed. Somewhere deep inside the marble palace, the exquisite music of the harem softly lilted. This was a new harem; Abbas had ordered all the six hundred wives, handmaidens and concubines of the Old Shah slaughtered. There was for all the beauty and splendour of the place a melancholy feeling of death. Abbas clapped Tughtikin on the back. “Tell me, have you ever heard the rhyme ‘if a man cannot afford his home then onto Vey for a golden dome’?”

“Indeed sire every child knows that rhyme. It’s a Bolfil saying isn’t it.”

“Very good, my friend and do you know the fabulous wealth that maybe found in Vey.”

“I know only of rumours sire.”

“Yes rumours” rejoined the Shah. There is none here who I trust to give me an accurate account of the wealth of Vey’s treasury. All I know is that our friend in the courtyard had smuggled who knows how much gold there. Moreover the local satrap, Narahan, has been tardy with paying homage. I am certain he means to be disloyal.”

“Does your majesty plan to seize Vey?”

“No not yet, I could be mistaken; news travels slowly from that part of the world. Rather I would have you travel incognito to Vey, determine the wealth, seek out those who maybe considered our friends and report to me directly about this ‘city of gold’ on your return.”

The Lay-Preacher paled, “Go now? To Vey?”

“Yes why not? A land of poets and whores in gold trinkets holds no fear surely. And on your return claim of me what you will.”

The villain’s cheeks returned to their natural hue of colour. “I would hold your majesty to your most regal word.”

It had been now two months since the fateful murder of Shah Behruz II and still Narahan had paid no homage to the new Shah. The taxes had flowed regularly out of Parestan so as not to alert the tyrant of the assembling band of rebels, and yet Narahan still sat nervously. No word had come from his envoys, no sign of the rightful Queen, if she was not found soon, he was sure that Vey would fall to an Abbasid siege.

Word had come from Kamalshahr of the growing lunacy of the new Shah, reports of bloodbaths in the Majestic city, of Christians and Zoroastrians having limbs torn apart in the great Meidan's of the city to appease the masses who now viewed Abbas with, not a loathing but a love.

It was agreed by all those in Vey that a war could not be waged, that to plunge the empire into another bitter struggle would spell its death as the hungry and ever watchful eyes of her neighbours would strike at the first chance to ravage the once proud Kingdom.

The Princess, when found would lead her army to Kamalshahr and take the city by stealth, without the carnage that was a part of the gruesome civil war between her father and uncle. Bahram the Grim had no mercy for his own men in that war, slaying them for incompetence, and slaughtering the Alkhvians whose land became known as Northern Babkha, as he and his men laid claim to its ravines, mountains and lakes.

But how to wait out the Princess' arrival without Abbas knowing of their plans? The Shah, he knew from the men who took the perilous trips to Kamalshahr, has been growing more bloodthirsty and suspicious by the day. Narahan had thought up a way to distract Abbas and keep his suspicions firmly away from Parestan.

Razjania Province, far south of Parestan, was the reservoir of Abbas's treachery, there the Mullahs, the Guards, the fanatical Muslims and its leaders were deeply loyal to the tyrant, for that, his hordes had left them well enough alone. However, thousands of men from a small yet prosperous city in the western desert of Razjania Province had joined his camp. The city, Dehvaz, was, much like Vey, a city of poets, or to be more exact, it was a city dominated by the Sufi.

A spiritual Islamic movement, the Sufi had always steered clear of bloodshed and

practiced the betterment of the mind through spiritual means. However, as an outlying city of Razjania, its boys had long been conscripted into the Razjanian Guards, and the heavy taxes to its Satraps had long made them anxious to break away from the warrior province.

A Dehvazi Sufi, Qasim Arran, had promised his and his men's support to topple Abbas, as long as the City and its region was granted its own Province, separate from that of the cold, cruel Razjania.

This made Narahan think about what the effects of dividing Razjania would have on Abbas, his bastion of support, if he believed to be against him would incur his wrath, dividing his supporters and driving the Shah to ever-desperate suspicions.

This was difficult for Narahan to think of, as he knew that such a thing would surely result in a bloodbath and he did not want the blood of innocent Babkhans on his hands. But yet, to save Vey, and to save Babkha, distracting Abbas would serve a great purpose.

He sat, alone in his quarters, devising a plan to trick Abbas into the belief of a Razjanian rebellion. His hands trembled and he begged for Allah's forgiveness as he did so...

“Why did you kill them so?”

“Hmm?” Flavian turned to Toghrul, the deposed Satrap who was now the rope bound guest of the Fidawis.

“My men, why did you butcher them like that? What man could carve out another's heart?”

The Willith remained impassive, his yellow predatory and tiger-like eyes remained fixed on the deposed Satrap.

“They were not your men; they were out to kill you. Are you not grateful that we saved your life? You got off lightly young sir.” The red haired Zjandarian's face had still not fully healed from the vicious beating that first acquainted him with Willith hospitality. Toghrul's rage glowed like an iron furnace; the colour of hot blood anger flushed his cheeks.

“It is one thing to be rescued from a pack of traitors, it is quite another to watch my kinsmen pinned to trees while their hearts were dug out by bloody sword point!”

Osric now mounted on his steppe pony cantered over to the 'guest' and his chaperone. “Is our esteemed guest giving you grief again Flavian?”

The hook nosed blonde stroked the mane of the pony while looking contemptuously at the bound prince. “Aye. That he is. Complaining about our treatment of his men, again.”

Osric leaned forward in his saddle. Now 'master', your men, if you wish to call them such were about to commit a crime, the most terrible crime a Willith knows – it may

be a more common occurrence in Zjandaria I don't know – and that crime is regicide, the killing of a king. The shedding of royal blood by those not of the blood can only be punished in one way, and that is the cutting out of the perpetrators heart. Now they were intent on killing you, we had been trailing them, thought they might be pursuing our Princess – found you instead.” He added bitterly.

A glimmer of recognition shone in the battered Satrap's eyes. “Your Princess, the Babkhan heir, Grace? She is alive still, and no longer a prisoner of Abbas.”

Osric nodded. “Our Satrap here is well informed.”

“He's a nomad, perhaps he can smell news.” Flavian flared his nostrils as if in imitation.

“Indeed she is free. Abbas had given her over to the Mestechap sultan, as a token of their new alliance – hardly matters he's dead now. And you can tell she's a true Willith, she cut the old perverts heart out and fed it to his dogs.”

Toghrul was incredulous, “And how did you come to know all this? Sniff the air?” perpetuating a bad joke.

Osric assumed a posture of authority in the saddle of his mage-ridden mount. “Oh hardly, I've just come from where she rests now. You won't believe it Flavian but the Princess found the patrol herself, stalked it for a day before announcing herself. She's a crafty one, and pretty, very pretty. He pointed with his gloved hand to Toghrul. “She would like to make your acquaintance o noble Satrap. I showed her majesty that sword of yours. Very good show it gave too. Cut through an iron bar as if it was bee's wax. She thinks you might fulfil Omar whoever-he-was' prophecy yet.”

“Oh, how? And his name was Omar Moyer incidentally.”

“In her service naturally, err and for the good and glory of Babkha, Willithia, Zjandaria and any other country that's got itself caught up in this damn mess. Come on Flavian untie the boy we need to tidy him up so he's right presentable for her majesty.”

Tughtikin woke as the dawn touched his eyelids with a streak of fire. The crimson white light glowed brightly from over the eastern horizon. There was not a cloud to be seen in the sky. As his senses returned he saw that his escorts where already busy about the day. He kicked the shin of his sleeping mule. Still tired under the fast fading twilight he ventured over to where the escort provided by the Shah laid. That escort, what an escort, five chosen men of the Taliban – suppositious fools who believed that a man with no beard allowed the devil to get between his chin and his prayer mat. The youngest, beardless, practically a boy still, of the escort grinned a greeting to him. The others, older, with black bushy beards and grim looks of indifference were busy wolfing down their breakfast. The boy passed over to Tughtikin his ration, a dry cake of rice and millet washed down with a warm gulp of water from the boy's canteen. The grimness of the orator-turned-spy's diet was one of necessity. If Tughtikin were to make it in Parestan he would have to look the part of someone who had escaped the displeasure of the Shah, a refugee, a hungry refugee. Certainly this part of the ruse

seemed to be all too effective, perfecting the false alibi, that of a court functionary who escaped one of Abbas Shah's purges, would take more work. "Hot day coming Boss," remarked the boy.

"Hotter days coming yet still," replied Tughtikin. "They'll all be hot soon enough, once I pass out of this valley." The youth looked nervous, like he was listening to some revelation of hell. Beyond that valley was the very heart of Parestan, the mysterious river that lead down onto the coastal plain and the legendary 'golden city' of Vey. The fact that the Satrap of Parestan had not implemented the Shah's orders had become ever more manifest as each day past. No more burnt granaries, no poisoned cisterns, the flocks of goats and sheep still grazed in peace, the fruit of the orchards were growing, and the storehouses were full. Fire Temples and mosques stood almost side-by-side in some parts. The full rigours of the Jihad had not been felt here. It was of course the Shah's fault Tughtikin reflected, leaving this province, as a haven of peace and safety would make it the natural bastion of resistance. Even if there were not the organised resistance the Shah now suspected, the Terror would have to make its passage through the region regardless. If the Abbasid dynasty would flourish not one element of the old Kapav regime could be allowed to remain uncrushed or uncorrupted.

The ridge that constituted the other side of the valley was home to a vista of mango plantations, date plums and rice paddies, all grown on irrigated stepped terraces. On the flood plain of the valley floor was more rice paddies and then village after village, with a road linking them all. Along that road Tughtikin could make out the small-multicoloured dots that were the stream of refugees flooding towards Vey like the waters of Parestan themselves, flowing in streams, rivers and floods towards the sea.

The party of Taliban had been careful to avoid the refugees and locals while crossing the border. Now that their charge was safely place to being his scouting mission, they without a word prepared to depart back up the valley into Babkha proper. Leaving Tughtikin in this strange world of calm. The infiltrator gave each of his party a handful of rials for their skill in guiding him over the mountains undetected; he pressed a large silver coin into the hand of the youth.

With the Taliban goons departed back into Abbasid territory, Tughtikin's first task would be to slip into to the winding column of refugees. He made his way down from the forested hillcrest along a track towards the first village of the valley.

Vey was nothing like what Tughtikin expected, he could tell from the faces of the fellow travelling fugitives that he was not alone in his consternation. Vey, the 'golden city', grey, grey and black, the walls, the towers, the mosques, the minarets, monotone and not a single glimmer of gold to be seen from outside the walls.

"On to Vey for a golden dome indeed!" The spy muttered under his breath.

"Not what you had been expecting hey?" A dirty grey bearded fakir piped up as if out of nowhere. The short hunched-backed grizzled man tapped his hobbling stick against the great pavestone slabs of the Parestan Trunk-Road. "In myth lies a grain of truth young man."

"I'm sorry old man but I've lost your meaning." Tughtikin was trying hard to pick up anything amounting to local knowledge on Vey. He had lost count of how many truly



trite and banal conversations he had initiated or endured while trying to prise out nuggets of information about the city and its ruler. ‘Good man’, ‘safe place’, ‘last refuge’, ‘last hope’, ‘city of gold’ etc; he had heard nothing but cliché, rumour and fantasy about the place throughout the long trek over the mountains. While the refugees largely seemed ignorant of their ultimate destination, chattering away excitedly as if they were on the march to some fairytale kingdom, the locals he had encountered along the path seemed singularly unhelpful and vague. While receiving the refugees with selfless hospitality the peasants had cleverly played themselves as fools. Giving no concrete answer to any question beyond a general affirmation that ‘its that way.’ Now perhaps before the very gates of Vey there was someone who would respond to the right questions, given the right incentives?

“Where are you from brother? I can’t say I recognise your accent.” Tughtikin hoped this would serve as a lead in towards a more purposeful conversation. The Fakir waved his left arm dismissively, “Out West, on back roads out on the frontier, feels like I have spent a couple of life times out on the steppe.” Looking at the contours and groves on the Old Man’s face Tughtikin was hardly surprised at that last statement, “Still must have been a shock to get back to Babkha and see all these...” Tughtikins piercing brown eyes drew attention to the column of bedraggled fugitives, “... changes.”

There was a twinkle in the Old Man’s eyes; “Somewhat disorientating yes, but then there are always people who lose out when there is a change in ruler, this time there just happens to be more than usual who, lost.” The spy picked up on the implication. “Well that’s us accounted for but did you lose?” The Old Man picked at a loose cobble with his stick, “Hardly, young man at my age I have a sense for anticipating these kinds of ‘changes’ as you call them. What’s more in answer to your real question, all that glimmers is not gold, similarly all that is grey is not stone.”

There it was on a plate, the purpose of his mission part fulfilled. Tughtikin’s jaw dropped, “Are you saying those domes really are gold?”

A wry smile on the Old Man’s face, “Ah, I see you are interested, I had you down as one who would be. Not just the domes you know, every structure in this city has gold laid into it somewhere.” From the outside Tughtikin had half expected the man’s mind to be a rubbish-heap of details, instead he was as sharp as a quill. Tughtikin knew now that there had to be more to this man, not a fakir, not a refugee, not a beggar, but what? The Old Man had an agenda for certain.

But Kokochu was not of a mind to let the Abbasid spy know what that agenda was.

# Shosu Abbas

Once in Zjandaria, close by the dwelling places of the Baracaons, a man by the name of Shosu Abbas lived, born to the station of wage labourer. Certainly born of undistinguished parents, their common names lost to history. From the lowest class of landless labourers had Shosu sprung, and in normal circumstances he would have lived and died unknown to any record save the dull anonymous scrolls of the taxman.

Shosu was however far from ordinary. Right from birth he grew at an exceptional rate, to the extent that by the age of ten he towered over his nameless father, himself by all accounts at least six feet tall. This in a country where the average height for adult men was five foot five.

The boy's unusual height excited interest amongst the Zjandarians from an early age. One day, just after his eleventh birthday, a delegation of Herbads and Mobads; senior priests from the Zoroastrian Agiary of Raspur, arrived in Shosu's village excited at the prospect of meeting the famously tall lad. Later in exchange for a few gold rials pressed into the palms of the village elders Shosu, amid the bitter tears and wailings of his parents, was bundled off to Raspur for a religious education. While the father gritted his teeth and the mothers tears flowed freely they finally consented for at least this way the boy would learn the valued art of writing and enjoy all the opportunities of the cities, though they feared they would never see him again they hoped that they might be better provided for in their old age if Shosu found his fortune as an educated man. Such are the thoughts of credulous country folk the world over.

The Mobads had however from the outset a secret motive in their purchase of the 'giant'. For centuries now the priests in Raspur had been reviled by the Farsi speaking southerners for the heinous crimes of committing fraudulent miracles and abbreviating the sacred Avestas. They needed a marvel that would restore their reputation with the faithful and their brethren in the other cities. It was the plan of the Mobad Dastur Eshan that where the Green Child and the two headed Turk had failed, a giant child reciting the entire text of the Avestas would succeed at last in drawing pilgrims, priests and academics, along with their clinking gold coins, to his impoverished Agiary.

Poor Eshan soon found he had struck a sorry bargain for his Giant. For Shosu's teachers in short order discovered that the boys brain had not grown to match the rest of his body, he was stupid and lazy in his studies and had made little progress in the memory tricks that Eshan vainly sought to teach him. In fact the boy was totally lazy and delighted in doing little than watching the atash fire, a fine thing if it was an act of piety but it was not, it was the merely the way this dull witted boy entertained himself.

Even after six months of the most rigorous tutelage Shosu still struggled to recite any of the Gatha hymns let alone a full Avesta. At last the Mobad Dastur resolved to make a return on his purchase. He put Shosu on show to the crowds, with the boy mumbling the Gathas as best he could. The Giant of the Agiary soon caught the imagination of the townsfolk, from the mighty Khan right down to the beggarly fakirs, the population of Raspur swarmed the temple compound, freely parting with their coins, copper, silver, and gold, to get a glimpse of the 'Giant'. Yet as the armies of the curious

multiplied and the Agiary coffers swelled so did the congregation of the faithful decline. Soon Pagans outnumbered those of the 'behdin', the good religion - Zoroastrianism, and moneylenders pitched their tents to cater for those who flocked, drawn by talk of the 'Marvel of Raspur'. Scholars raved that the 'gaur' - infidels had allowed their temple to become a haven for compound interest, the Mobads smiled and went back to the counting table.

For over five years the Agiary did good business by word of mouth and those priests who resented the debasement of their religion before the profit motive had their fears calmed by the newfound wealth. In turn the self-confidence of riches induced them to spend and under Eshan's instruction the mud brick Agiary was transformed into an edifice of gold and marble, with painted columns and hanging tapestries adorning a building that grew ever wider and taller. All the while as the building work went on Shosu wowed the crowds with careless displays of strength, now juggling timber and stone, now lifting a fully loaded cart on to his shoulders, now snapping the spine of a suitably enraged ox, all to the considerable amusement of the crowd. Though never in spite of the crowds pleadings, secretly inspired by a Mullahs wit, did Shosu consent to wrestling a lion.

However it was a mistake on the part of the priesthood to believe that the good times would last forever. Finally the travellers were no longer drawn from other lands to see Eshan's marvel and the crowds grew tired of the oafish fifteen year old who could lift and break and kill without thought yet struggled, even if he recited by rote, to express the most basic tenets of his supposed faith. Worse yet as the curious dwindled the congregation failed to return. Put off by the cheap and sometimes bloody spectacles which subordinated the great god Ahura Mazda to a dumb idle oversized boy the Zoroastrians of Raspur had learned to exclude priests from the role of intermediary between themselves and their god, worse yet many had succumbed to the heretical mysticism of the Dark Ocean Society.

The bad news continued to accumulate as Shosu turned sixteen at a height of nine feet, a widely publicised fact that for a short time drew in new crowds, and rashly Eshan took the short revival as an opportunity to initiate the construction of a new tower. This time the Mobad Dastur had the added misfortune to hire a worthless gang of builders previously employed in putting together the wretched three storey slum tenements that were the curse of Raspur 'Christian' Quarter, that portion of the city which laid beyond the walls. This worthless crew of work shy workmen and amateur architects, whose buildings were seldom demolished because they could be counted on to collapse or catch fire first, obtained this prestige project because while they were haphazard, indeed lethal, builders they were accomplished liars and the Mobad Dastur was convinced that the Nestorian Bishop was on the verge of hiring Rustam Qajar and his gang of swindlers for the construction of a 'cathedral'. As suited the level of skill and commitment of the workforce the tower never moved beyond the first storey and nowhere was applied the marble facing which Eshan demanded of all his buildings. It stayed like this for two more years with Rustam Qajar eventually disappearing into the night with as much gold as his camels could carry, never to be seen again. One of his hirelings was however caught and flayed by the enraged Mobad Dastur - the skin of the hapless workman was draped as a tapestry in Eshan's anti-chamber. No amount of butchers work inflicted upon a shoddy builder however could hide the fact that the Agiary treasury was now empty.

It was failure compounded by mismanagement and wanton brutality that finally turned the priesthood against their egomaniac leader. A delegation of lesser Mobads remonstrated with the Mobad Dastur in his private quarters over his failings, demanding that he resign, repent, or flee. When Eshan felt moved to strike the elder Mobad in the delegation with his staff, a brutal act which saw the old man sink to the floor with a broken jaw, the other Mobads retired to one side and allowed the junior Herbads to rush in and seize their unreasoned and greedy master. Tightly bound, gagged, and weighted, the Mobad Dastur was dragged, his muffled screams silenced by angry kicks and blows, to the butchers and tanners street, at the end of which was a gapping hole an opening for a cavernous pit, used for centuries as a dump for the waste generated by the tradesmen of that street. There, now aided by an excited and sympathetic mob, the Mobad Dastur was then borne aloft only to be cast down into the stinking pit. His presumed death by drowning in the offal and filth of slaughtered animals.

For Shosu Abbas, a fate not much better was in the offing. Deterred by his very size and strength the Herbads declined to come to grips with the witless usurper of their god instead resolving to burn him out of his lodgings. This they did with some success and he was forced to flee into the open, gasping for air, retching from the inhalation of smoke. Foolishly some of the mob, which arrived after the slaying of Eshan attempted to overpower the giant and tie him down with, ropes. Instead they themselves, a group some twenty strong, were overwhelmed with Shosu making good sport of cracking their skulls with his fists. The lucky ones fled to the safety of the gathering crowd bloodied and with broken bones. The luckless were dead.

Now it was Shosu's turn to take to his heels and bolt; yet there was no safety in the streets or in the Agiary, where all were against him. Instead he sprinted in gigantic strides to the site of the unfinished tower. Abandoned tools were still scattered about the place and Shosu hoped to find the implements to hack a path through his one-time audience. He was fortunate and soon held in either hand a workman's hammer and axe. Unfortunately for him as soon as the crowd spied the weapons now in his possession and imagining the carnage he would inflict on them were he to get close they, on the instruction of the priests, gathered up rocks and even ripped up the cobbles of Raspur's paved streets, hurriedly proceeding to stone the boy, initially to ward him off, then as more rocks struck home and the giant began to falter their confidence surged and the stoning grew more aggressive. Shosu was a strong boy and he absorbed the blows as best he could, yet finally one lobbed stone brought a glancing blow to his temple. Blood gushed from the gashed wound and the giant slumped to his knees. A cry of triumph went up from the crowd, yet just as they readied to surge forward and dispatch Shosu they found themselves interrupted by two overriding priorities. The fire that forced Shosu out of his lodgings had predictably started to spread across the compound and now flames were starting to touch upon the Agiary. Thus the urgent priority for the Mobads was to save their sacred scriptures and prevent the purportedly eternal flame of the atash fire being lost in the conflagration. Of more concern to the crowds was that the armed retainers of the Amir of Raspur had chosen this moment, acting on the sight of the spreading fire, to launch a sally out from the Khan's citadel against the rioters. Between flames and scimitars the crowd scattered, content to leave Shosu for dead close by the folly tower that had cost his master his life.

Yet Shosu lived still and chancing upon his battered but breathing body the Amir, a man well versed in the religious books of the Jews and Christians, believed he had found his Goliath. The Amir, Kay Khosrow, evidently chose to pay no heed to the truism that every Goliath has his David and took Shosu Abbas into his service the eventual price of Shosu's freedom from the Mobads being a general pardon for those involved in the murder of Eshan.

Shosu Abbas was lodged at the Khan of Zjandaria's fortress and was restored to health and defended against the malice of the Mobads at much expense, yet such was the Amirs pride in his newly purchased warrior that no expense was spared in training and equipping the lad. Instantly promoted to the rank of Malik upon his full recovery and furnished in a special suit of armour tailored and adapted for his special height, alongside this as weapon of choice for the seventeen year old was a monstrous broadsword of European manufacture, weapons of this type alongside newfangled firearms were entering the Kingdom of Babkha via the port city of Vey with ever more frequency as Portuguese caravels arrived now every year in the Indian Ocean and the Babkhan Gulf.

However Shosu's patron did not have long for this world. Zjandaira, a recent creation born out of a union of feuding nomad tribes, to the North were the tribes of Turks and Mongols, ever ready to sweep down in devastating raids. To the South laid an expansionist Iranian state; the Kingdom of Babkha, to the East, Tibet, more Mongols, and the Manchu Empire in China, and from the West now even came reports of a rising new Empire, the Russians under their Muscovite Tsar. Amir Kay therefore was frequently called upon to launch punitive campaigns against both marauding barbarians and the steadily encroaching great powers.

Amir Kay fully intended that his Goliath would take pride of place in his army on the next campaign. That came soon enough in the same year when Razjanians in the service of the Babkhan Shah stormed North from their stronghold in Kandahar and overwhelmed the weak Zjandarian garrison based there. The Tajik and Uzbek warlords who had propped up the Khan's rule among the Northern Afghans fled into the mountains, making a notable stand in the Pansijer Valley. At the head of a force of 2,000 armoured cavalry and 7,000 infantry the Amir marched briskly South to stem the Babkhan incursion and aid the hillfolk in recapturing Kabul.

Amir Kay lead his horsemen East while sending scouting parties ahead to contact the mountain tribes who remained loyal to the Khan against the Shah. Shosu Abbas, now fifteen feet tall, was sent as a runner to a group of horsemen led by the Turk Oscan. To the astonishment of Oscan, and his escort of seven archers, Shosu with giant strides kept pace with their galloping steeds. From Raspur they ventured towards the strangest and most remote portion of all Zjandaria; Kaffiristan, a mountainous land of glacial cold, home reputedly to cannibals, sodomites, and demons. The party approached Kaffiristan along a wide flat river plain, where the water unlike elsewhere flowed in wide sloughful meanders. The most awe-inspiring mountains that were beyond mans conceit to describe bound the plain on either side. It would be three days good travelling on horseback to travel from the foothills of one side of the valley to the other. Along this flat plain that stretched towards the heart of the Mountains of the Moon and the Kaffir territories was the domain of a vain and stupid warlord, the

Black Ardashir of Kulob. Kulob was home to a fortified encampment bounded by the towers and spires of the pagans who took their shelter in Kulob from the predatory barbarians of the mountains. Although only three hundred feet high, Kulob was the highest point in territory and at the highest point of this shallow hill stood Ardashir's Camp, the Black Ardashir's citadel.

As it happened for the nine travellers the time of their intrusion into the lands of Black Ardashir, the whole valley was gripped by revolutionary ferment. A curious tribe of egalitarians known as the 'Tudeh' to their enemies had infiltrated Kulob. Promising a better life of liberty and a finer share in proceeds from the taxing of travellers the Tudeh doctrinaires stirred the Bandaka, the slaves who produced and provided for Black Ardashir and his companions, into revolt. Subsequently the Black Ardashir was trapped up on Ardashir's Camp, besieged by his own chattel slaves who in turn had failed in every attempt to defeat the Black Ardashir who could from the safety of his chariot slaughter a dozen Bandaka's with bow and scimitar before speeding back up to the safety of his camp.

Now at nights, hauntingly illuminated by torchlight, his hair greased and matted his face covered by the mask of a ferocious black wolf, he taunted his timid enemies to send out a champion to fight him. None dared and slowly the revolution was losing momentum, if the Tudeh lost heart and drifted away the Bandaka's would face the most awful pogrom and all the worst tortures that could be conceived of in Black Ardashir's foul mind.

The Zjandarians wore jackets of padded silk over which laid coats of mail, they bore a spiked metal helmets with a fore piece that extended downwards to cover their noses, and carried lance, bow, axe and sword. As they walked for some respite along the bank of the great river they clanked in their armour, drowning out the sound of the muffled hoof beats in the grassy sward. Their strong martial appearance soon gained the attention of Bandaka shepherds; the giant who jogged along side the parties' horses especially astonished them. At length the braver shepherds ventured to block the path to giant into their lands. They were a motley crew; riding old nags armed with spears, staffs, and one rusty old sword. The Bandaka formed a line along a narrow causeway between the river and a series of water meadows. Many more timid Bandaka's came on foot and laid low in the reeds.

Seeing a good chance for sport in cracking bones Shosu strode forward, unsheathing his sword, waving it furiously at the on coming peasants

