

CHILD OF AN ANCIENT CITY



TAD WILLIAMS
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PROLOGUE

"Merciful Allah! I am a calf, fatted for slaughter."

Masrur al-Adan roared with laughter and crashed his goblet down on the polished wood table—once, twice, thrice. A trail of crescent-shaped dents followed his hand. "I can scarce move for gorging."

The fire was banked and shadows walked the walls. Masrur's table—for he was master here—stood scatter-spread with the bones of small fowl.

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

Ibn Fahad allowed himself a thin, cold smile. "We have indeed wreaked massacre on the race of pigeons, old friend." His slim hand swept above

the littered tabletop. "My compliments to your cook."

"My cook," said Masrur. He smirked. "A jewel, as well you know. However, he does not stir from the kitchen these days; his old wound still pains him. I will convey your appreciation tomorrow."

Ibn Fahad said, "We have also put the elite guard of your wine cellars to flight. And, as usual, I thank you for your hospitality. But do you not sometimes wonder if there is more to life than growing fat in the service of the Caliph?"

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

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

"Baba!" Masrur bellowed. "Come here, you old dog!"

Within three breaths an old servant stood in the doorway, looking to his sportive master with apprehension.

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

Baba pulled at a grizzled chin. "Ah . . . ah, but *you* drank it, Master. You and Master Ibn

Fahad took the last four jars with you when you went to shoot arrows from the city walls."

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

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

"A story, a story!" someone shouted. "A tale!"

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

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

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

"Oh, Masrur, please!" Hassan had not given

up; he was as unshakeable as a young falcon with its first prey beneath its talons. "Tell us of the north. Tell us of the infidels!"

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

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

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

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

Ibn Fahad glowered. "Because I know better.

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

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

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

Chapter 1: THE CARAVAN

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

My troop received a commission to accompany a caravan going north, bound for the land of the Armenites beyond the Caucassian Mountains. A certain prince of that people had sent a great store of gifts as tribute to the Caliph, gifts of a richness no one could ignore: crowns of beaten gold with diamonds inset, daggers of a metal harder than those in the Caliph's armory, and hanks of black wool carded to a marvelous soft-

ness and spun into thread as fine as a girl-child's hair. This prince invited the Caliph to open a route for trade between his principality and our caliphate. (12)

✓ Harun al-Rashid, wisest of wise men that he was, did not exactly make the camels groan beneath the weight of the gifts that he sent in return, but he did send three slaves, one a master in the art of cookery, and several courtiers, including the Under-Vizier Walid al-Salameh, who had made a study of barbarian dialects and could speak for the Caliph and assure this Armenite prince that rich rewards would follow when the route over the Caucasians was opened for good. (13)

We left Baghdad in grand style: pennants flying, the shields of the soldiers flashing like golden dinars, slaves bearing the boxed litters of the courtiers, and the Caliph's gifts bundled onto the backs of a gang of evil, contrary donkeys. (14)

(15) We followed the banks of the Tigris, resting and provisioning several days at Mosul, then continued through the eastern edge of Anatolia. Already as we mounted northward the land was beginning to change, the clean sands giving way to rocky hills and scrub. The weather was colder and the skies gray, as though even in the season of spring Allah's face was turned away from that country, but the men were not unhappy to be out from under the desert sun. Our pace was good; there was not a hint of danger except the occa- (16)

— chaul. 狼的嚎叫.
sional howls of wolves beyond the circles of our
nightly campfires. Before two months had passed
we had reached the foothills of the Caucasians—
what is called the steppe country. [strein] 偏南道 迷路 望求

For those of you who have not strayed far
from our Bagdad, I should tell you that the north-
ern lands are like nothing you have seen. The trees
there grow so close together you could not throw
a stone five paces without striking one. In the
foothills are nut-bearing trees with leaves smaller
than your hand, clustered as thickly as the hairs in
my beard, but higher in the mountains stand trees
with branches bearing clumps of fragrant green
needles all the way down the trunk. The land itself
seems always dark—the trees mask the sun before
the afternoon is properly finished—and the ground
is damp, with many stones. Ravines, deeper than
any minaret stands high, cleave the mountains,
and water plumes and plunges over steep drop-
offs like pale horses' tails. On the high peaks, of
which there are many, snow clings, even in the
height of summer. Indeed, we saw in one place
near the top of the pass a field several leagues wide
made entirely of ice. [damp] 潮湿 [minaret] 宣礼塔 [cleave] 劈开 [drop-offs] 陡坡 [pale horses] 苍白的马 [snow clings] 积雪 [leagues] 英里 [entirely] 完全

But, in truth, the novelty of it faded quickly,
and before long it seemed that the smell of decay
was always with us. We caravaners had been over
eight weeks traveling, and the bite of homesick-
ness was strong, but we contented ourselves with
the thought of the accommodations that would be
[decay] 腐烂 [caravaners] caravan 商队 [bite] 咬 [homesickness] 思乡病 [contented] 满足 [accommodations] 住宿

ours when we reached the palace of the prince, laden as we were with our Caliph's good wishes—and the tangible proof thereof. I myself had never been to a northern principality before, though I had seen northern goods traded at market, and I wondered what strange new things, people, and creatures I might observe. As I said, all my appetites were strong in those days.

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

We were encamped one night in a box canyon, a thousand steep feet below the summit of the tall Caucasian peaks. The fires were not much but glowing coals, and nearly all the camp was asleep except for two men standing sentry. I was wrapped in my bedroll, dreaming of how I would spend my earnings—dreaming especially of a girl with a neck slender as a gazelle's, hair like night, and a gaze that filled my heart with longing—when a terrible shriek awakened me.

Sitting groggily upright, I was promptly knocked down by some bulky thing tumbling onto my chest. A moment's horrified examination showed that it was one of the sentries, his throat pierced with an arrow, his eyes bulging with his final surprise. Suddenly there was a chorus of howls from the hillside above. My heart pounded. All I could think of was wolves, that the wolves were coming down on us: In my

witless state I could make no sense of the arrow, at all.

Even as the others sprang up around me the camp was suddenly filled with leaping, whooping shadows, as though the gates of Hell had swung open to release their prisoners. The copery scent of fresh blood tainted the air. Blades glinted in the faint light of the coals and another arrow hissed past my face in the darkness. The groans of wounded and dying men, the grunts of effort as others threw themselves into combat, the clash of blade on blade—Allah be praised, these sounds awakened sense in me, for I had been in battle before. These were human wolves we faced.

I reached for my sword's hilt, but my blade and I were both pinioned beneath the dead sentry. As I struggled to push the unfortunate man off me, a booted foot suddenly stamped the soil near my head. I lay still as just above me a bandit and one of my comrades crossed blades.

The bandit, garbed in black—as I later learned is the custom of these Caucasian rogues—bore an immense curved blade that gleamed red in the dying light. I later learned that my comrade-at-arms was only a slender youth.

(And did you not suspect, Ibn Fahad, old friend, that our mission was not of the greatest importance, since most of the soldiers with the caravan were inexperienced and unblooded? I my-

self had been disciplined recently for the incident with the Frankish unbeliever and the donkey, and thought this journey might have been meted out to me as part of my penance—a trip through lands where ice lay on the ground meant to cool my blood, as indeed it did—but this did not explain your presence, old comrade. I doubt not there's a tale in it.)

So I lay on the ground, bladeless and cursing silently. Soon enough the young soldier took a stab to the stomach and collapsed beside me, his eyes half open as they stared into the next world. I had lain still throughout, hoping to escape detection, for pinioned as I was by the sentry's corpse, I had not a hope of defense.

My deception must have been successful, for after cutting the purse off the dead soldier's belt and glancing at the sentry lying upon me, the bandit turned and hurried away.

Ah, Ibn Fahad, old friend, you laugh at my unusual discretion in that long-ago time; but even I know that sometimes a still tongue can preserve a life.

But, of course, under other circumstances, a quiet tongue can lead to a cut throat.

In any case, there I was in a moment of lull between assaults, protected by night-shadows. I finally succeeded in heaving off the sentry's corpse and freeing my blade from its scabbard, and I was just about to rise and join my fellows in battle.

Then something crashed against my bare head,
filling the nighttime with a great splash of light
that illuminated nothing.

I fell back, insensible.

Chapter 2:

AFTERMATH

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

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

It was Ibn Fahad, of course. The caravan had