

The Old Man of the Mountain

I had traversed these orange mountains for days with the head of a great foe hanging from my belt. Over dry lake, clay pan and orange and red sand dunes dotted with dead acacia trees, the deep blue of the sky, and the shifting, burnished red of the sands. The great unblinking eye followed me always. There is much blood in this infinite sea of sand. The horse I had ridden had long expired from thirst and exhaustion. And I had to pray to God for oasis after oasis and He delivered. Him Who made the grain split and created the soul.

Deep in the valley below, set forth with their great train of red, snarling camels and little patient donkeys and slender, nervous horses toward the rising sun. Behind them the green hills of Canaan died out as a rainbow dies out, and now there was sand before me and now bleak mountains, and by day the wind was swift and hot and by night it was black and cold. And moons were born and died.

And I had passed through the land of the King of Hayk, and passed Ararat, the mountain where Noah brought his ark to anchor, and where it still is, and where it can be seen still, but cannot be reached, so cold and high and terrible is that mountain.

And I had passed ruined and forlorn Babel, that was built of Nimrod, the first king of the world, and now is desolation. The Tower rising into the clouds above further than the eye could see, casting a dark shadow over the desert. Built so the Pharaohs could mount up to heaven and confront the God of Moses. I passed it on a waning moon. And out of the ruins the dragons came and hissed, and strange, obscene birds flapped their wings in the air and cawed and pecked at them, and over the desert the satyr called unto his mate.

And I had passed through the Kingdom of Sakartvelo, whose kings are born with the mark of an eagle on their right shoulder. I passed through Persia, where the magicians worship fire.

And passed still through the city of Saba, where sleep the three magi who came to worship at Bethlehem, and their names were Kaspar, Balthasar, and Melchior.

And I had passed through Camadi, where great ruins are and robbers roam through the magical darkness. And passed northward of the Perilous Valley, where the Devil's Head is in black stone, and that is one of the nine entrances to hell, and passed the Valley of the Cockadrills, where there are serpents five fathoms in length, and passed the Valley of Cruel Women, who have precious stones in place of eyes. And I traversed the Dismal Desert, where no stream sang.

And in the desert, I had passed the Trees of the Sun and Moon, which speak with the voices of men. And it was from the Speaking Tree that Alexander heard of his death. And it was near there that he and Darius fought. And I passed the Arbre Sec, the Dry Tree, which has a green bark on one side and white on the other, and there are no trees within a hundred miles of that tree, and it is sprung from the staff of Adam.

And I had passed through Balkh, the Mother of Cities. And passed through Tailian, where the great salt mountains are. And passed through Badashan, where the mountains of the rubies are. And I passed through Kashmir, whose women are very beautiful, and whose magicians weave the strongest spells in the world. And moons were born and died.

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Then there it was, the most-welcome sight I had prayed for. The golden domes of the burnished mosque came into view and the tall fortress like Babylon spiralled around this great rock made up of twisting spires, arches and hanging gardens, and bordered by many golden towers and conduits. At the top of the rock lay Sabbah's secret chambers and the

Sacred Library – a fortress within a fortress. A place founded on rock, on a mountain, a stone, a spur, a cliff, on another plane entirely. The very thick and high walls snaked over the lofty mountains that we called home in a circuit of thirty miles, and it was entered by two doors, and they were hidden, cut into the deep mountain and under constant watch.

God be praised! I had finally arrived at my home of Alamut, south of the Caspian Sea, hidden in its beautiful valley between two lofty mountains. I went to look for Grand Master Hassan-i Sabbah. In order that none without Sabbah's licence might find their way into this enchanted valley, he had caused an impregnable castle to be erected at the opening of it, through which the entry was through fortified secret passage through the mountain, under constant sentry-watch. We lived deep in enemy territory, an enclave within Seljuk lands. We knew how to hide in plain sight like chameleons in the desert.

The Castle of Alamut, nested on the top of the colossal mass of granite rock, is the remote centre of mine and my brothers' world. The fortress sits astride a dangerously narrow ledge of rock resembling the handle and blade of a knife. I gaze upon it, bordered by a meteor's streak and the arc of the galaxy hangs over it. A purple sky awning scattered with stars and deep with cosmic mystery and the unfathomable.

From the river and the lakes, a thick, fleecy mist rises each evening, climbing up the cliff but stopping midway. For anyone who is there to see it, the castle of Alamut then becomes an island in an ocean of cloud. Seen from below, it looks like the haunt of the djinni. From the distance, to one arriving along the Azeri road, it looks like a natural wall, dazzling white in the sun, bluish in the purple dusk, bloody at dawn. On some days it blends with the clouds entirely, flashed with lightning.

Along its upper ridge one could just make out what seemed a row of flint swords that shot upward for hundreds of lengths. The most accessible side is a treacherous slope of gravel

which no man except Hashashin is able to scale. From there, the fortress is reached only by a secret stairway bitten out of the rock, like the spiral peel of a stone apple, and a single archer could defend it. Dizzying. A world elsewhere. For outsiders, Alamut could only be reached astride eagles. This is a land of mountains so high that they are snow-capped in the desert.

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When I entered the fortress, it became known that the caravan of the Polos had come to rest for the day. The Old Man of the Mountain had put out white magic, and he drew this Westerner from the Court of Venetia, Marco Polo, to the castle as a magnet draws a needle. And Polo, the great traveller of the Silk Road, galloped up to the Castle in the waning moon, and the Old Man looked down on him from the battlements and stroked his long white beard. By night the Supreme Leader like a civilised wolf in a turban stretches out on a parapet above the garden and glares at the sky. It is here that disciples may be ordered to fling themselves off the ramparts into the black – but also true that some of them will learn to fly like sorcerers.

I entered the Supreme Preacher's court, the maydan, and watched the Old Man entertain a number of youths, from the age of twelve to eighteen years, as had he done so with me. These boys had been selected from the dwellers of the surrounding mountains, who showed a skill and disposition for martial exercises, and appeared to possess the quality of daring courage. I looked on at the boys in admiration, for I could see from their countenances that this was so, they were possessed by the indomitable spirit of the Nizari.

The European man watched on inquisitively with his eyes narrowed, as though to hide his amazement at what he was witnessing, despite already coming from fire-pits and lands of giants. I had perched myself atop a ledge above the Christians so I could learn more about their ways, for my own curiosity and knowledge, and for Sabbah's diplomacy. Only when

they are unaware will you see the real truth of things. Polo began speaking with one from his Frankish entourage.

“Fascinating isn’t it? So brilliant yet so depraved. This mere man has cultured for himself a persona of Godship. His wisdom rivals that of Sunzi, Master Sun. The soldiers of this Mulahi country are veritable brigands. Look now, when they see a lusty youth, they tempt him with the hope of gain, and bring him to such a point that he will be ready to kill his father or his elder brother with his own hand. After he is enlisted, they intoxicate him, and carry him in that state into a secluded retreat, where he is charmed with delicious music and beautiful women. All his desires are satisfied for several days, and then, in sleep, he is transported back to his original position. When he awakes, they ask what he has seen. He is then informed that if he will become part of the Order, he will be rewarded with the same felicity. And with the texts and prayers that they teach him they heat him to such a pitch that whatever commission be given him he will brave death without regret in order to execute it.”

As soon as Polo had finished whispering to his scribe, a youth sat up dazedly. “O master! Surely the Hidden Imam himself! Am I awake or am I dreaming?”

Sabbah told him, “Take heed that thou tell not the dream to any stranger for they will not comprehend such magnificence. Know that your Lord has vouchsafed to show you the place destined for you in Paradise.”

Marco, even more softly hissed, “See how the Lord of the Mountains rules over a covert brotherhood of fearless, vicious and completely insane warriors completely dedicated to his cause.”

“What inspires these youths to traverse behind the impenetrable walls of this death mountain?”

“Have I not already said? Because of Hassan-i Sabbah’s fame, recruits come to him with the intention of learning the mysterious ways of the Isma’ili. These bellicose beverages conjure up in their mind a beautiful and captivating place beyond their wildest dreams, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.”

“Heavens, and what does this paradise look like?”

“The place looks like heaven, a glorious place full of wine, honey, all kinds of fountains, palm trees and incredibly beautiful women dancing in the nude. The youths who have nothing will enjoy this false paradise, and who can blame them, for a few hours, and then the Old Man would appear and say something, as we have just witnessed, in the lines of – ‘This is what I am offering to you, follow my teaching and submit wholly to my will and I shall illumine the way to Heaven’. And like that, he has built for himself a legion of fanatics willing to carry out his every will, even if death surely cometh. The Sheikh of the Mountain has perfected a method of securing the loyalty of human beings to an extent and on a scale which has seldom, if ever, been paralleled in any corner of this world. This, my friend, is absolute faith not seen anywhere in Christendom.”

What fanciful lies the men from the West speak of. I have seen Paradise itself, as they have described, and it is impossible that it was all but a fevered dream. It was all too real, and I truly felt the presence of the Almighty. No dream can imitate such glory. The lies told by the cunning Polo will no doubt filter back to this Christendom they spoke of as fuel for further impositions on this land.

“By God, Marco, their kind is surely unrivalled anywhere in the world.”

“Yes, I think not. They kill without discrimination. They are unfettered by politics and creed, executing for whatever best serves their own interests. But fear not of death, their treacherous

sect shall one day be crushed under the heel of perdition, and Hell will be heated with the fuel of their vile affronts against God.”

“Amen. In God’s name it shall be so.”

“I see them now, immortalised in my work – ‘Pray attend me while I tell my tale of the Old Man of the Mountain. Who by devious schemes, evil designs and foul murders ruled the land. No host of arms, no vast array of banners served this wicked Lord. They were but few - ruthless, reckless men. Who obeyed his cruel commands.’”

“These tales from the Orient will both delight and repulse the masses. Their eyes will widen in wonderment and the name Marco Polo shall be forever spoken as the great man who dared to travel the Silk Road and speak with devils in their hells.”

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As a young man, Sabbah had deemed me worthy to witness the secret Garden of Paradise. In order to enter, I had to imbibe the golden herb. When I awoke from a state of stupor beyond this gate of burnished gold, I saw ecstasy incarnate – beauteous young maidens and bright-coloured exotic plants. Out of the ether formed this luxuriant garden stored with every delicious fruit and every fragrant shrub under the warm gaze of the sun. Palaces of various sizes and forms had risen out of the ground in different places, ornamented with works in gold, with paintings, and with furniture of rich silks. By means of small conduits in these burnished spires, streams of wine, milk, honey, and some of pure aqua, flowed in every direction – such was the abundance of this place.

The dwellers of these palaces were those graceful damsels, accomplished in the arts of singing, playing all kind of instrument, as well as dancing, especially those of amorousness and allurement. Adorned in rich dresses, they continually sported and amused themselves in the garden and its pavilions, their guardians being confined within doors and never suffered

to appear. My senses were struck with all the delightful objects, surrounded by these lovely maidens, singing, playing, and attracting my regard by the sweetest caresses, serving me delicate foods and exquisite wines, until intoxicated with excess revelry amidst actual rivulets of milk and wine. They began to bathe me so in sweet aromas that the heavy smell of death I carried on earth was rinsed away. I was assuredly in Paradise, and felt a strong unwillingness to relinquish its delights.

Then I saw a beauty unsurpassable. I stepped down, trying not to look long at her lest she disappear under my gaze like a cruel mirage. It was as if she were the sun, yet I saw her, like the sun, even without looking. It was there that I saw the queen of all the beauties. This one stood out even amongst the many lovely maidens, such was her radiance. I was convinced that she was an Angel sent from God as a reward for my service. There was nothing else. She beckoned me over with dark impenetrable eyes, and like a lapdog I go to her, there she dances with her hips and body like a serpent in gold bangles and flowing red silks and jade and I am engulfed in her splendour. She was more beautiful than the Kashmiri, Mazandarani and even the Gorgestani and Azeri. Her beauty was otherworldly.

“Sabbah, who is this woman?”

“She is yours, Sinan”

“I need her. Something tells me that I have seen her before in another life.”

“It would not surprise me, given her legendary beauty transcends life itself.”

“I would rather have this one than all the others when I die in service. Is it promised that I will get back to her forever?”

“You shall. Provided you do my bidding, such is the Will of God.”

“I will do anything you desire Master, to make it so.”

When a few days had passed, I was given more hashish by Sabbah and plunged again into this beautiful reverie, this celestial visitation. Then I awoke outside, and immediately searched for those gates of burnished gold so that I may taste Paradise and look upon her divine countenance once again, but only finding myself at the foot of the Grand Master's throne.

"Sinan, my child, you had simply disappeared into thin air for days. It is as though your spirit was momentarily set free to flit in the next life. Where have you been?", he said with eyes that suggested he already knew the answer.

"In Paradise, through the favour of your Highness."

I realised that the whole court had gathered around me and I recounted my ascension before them too. They listened to us with eager curiosity and astonishment as I gave account of the scenes I had just witnessed. Such was my skill with a blade, I had assumed the status of a semi-divine usually given to the Imam or the Grand Master himself. People whispered that I was God's angel of death sent to earth to enact his divine retribution. They spoke whispers of the dark pits of my eyes, darker even than my hair. Truth be told, I come from the valleys, silent, unwavering and lethal.

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Sabbah looked out pensively on the distant horizon, stroking his thick white beard. A gaze of serenity, wisdom and a glint that he knew something far beyond our reckoning. He is hypnotic. He is the Da'i clad in white robes and turban. He is like a God to us.

At least part of the veneration of Sabbah is based on his powers of telepathy and clairvoyance. He once answered troubling questions about the faith that I had not voiced to him, but *thought* outside of his window, demonstrating his psychic mind-reading powers and precognition. When he first came to this place, with no army, Sabbah converted everyone

inside Seljuk Alamut and simply walked in announcing, 'I am now Lord of this place'. Such is the aura of the man.

Sabbah is the master alchemist who brewed our fabled potion, the one by which we remain steadfast and glimpsed a promised Paradise, so well-versed he is in the inner-chemical secrets of the lodges of Anatolia, who kept their core beliefs secret from outsiders. It is whispered in awe that he even possesses the ability to manipulate events in far-off lands by magical means. He is not of this world, this much is clear. All of these secrets he had learned as a student at the Abode of Learning in Cairo. Perched on the recesses of the highest reach, Sabbah preached absolute devotion to a transcendental God held within the constellations above on that canvas of deep blue.

I remember when I, a youth, truly understood his true wondrous nature. He approached me as I washed the blood from my face in a basin after training. He put his hand on my shoulder and I looked up. I felt his hand there on the shoulder, but to my amazement he could not be seen in the mirror in front. I looked down at the hand, and back at mirror, nothing. I turned around fully to face him with eyes agape in wonder, and there he was stood over me with that familiar smile.

“Rashid, to be a true Hashashin, we need to move silently more than unseen.”

“But you are invisible, like a spirit or jinni!”

“Exactly. My child, do not tell anyone of what you have seen today, or not seen I should say, they are not yet ready to understand.”

“As you wish, Grand Master.”

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When I was a little older and wiser, and my eyes opened up onto the horizon, the Old Man reminded me never to stray from him and falter in the Order's mission. Sabbah took me into the castle courtyard where the head of a deserter lay at the foot of his throne, covered in blood. Yet there was something unnatural about the way it twitched, and then to my astonishment, the head opened its eyes as though imploring Sabbah. He invited me to speak to the head. The talking head then turned itself slightly and fixed its eyes upon me. It told of the Paradise after earthly death if I gave all of my heart to the cause, as he had not, repentant with every vestige of his condemned soul.

He then invited initiates into the maydan. "Tell them," commanded the Grand Master, "what you have seen. You have seen the head of a man who died, whom you all knew. I have reanimated him to speak with his own tongue." I, his disciple, then described the delights of our awaiting Paradise, should we follow the Order steadfast. Later that day, the head was placed on a stake in the central courtyard as a warning to all should their heads turn to the gold and riches of the Sultans.

The very next day, a European from the court of the Franks, by the name of Count Henry of Champagne, a personal representative of the Christian Emperor, came travelling through Ismaili lands when returning from Hayk, to speak with the Old Man. Little did he know that the veiled figure he would battle wits against is able to control men with his mind and read their thoughts, and who is the incarnation of God on earth.

The Count claimed to have the most powerful army in Christendom and at any moment could defeat the Hashashin, because his army is ten times larger, and so, the Order should pay him an annual tribute. Sabbah let his words sit in the air like the aroma of yak-filth as I span my blade on the ground awaiting his response. I laughed under my own breath as Sabbah retorted

that the Order's army is the most powerful. And to prove it, he told two fidais to climb to the top of the castle's towers, rising high upon the crags of the mountains.

"These," said Sabbah, pointing to them, "obey me far better than the subjects of you Christians obey their kings. You see those devotees standing guard on yonder turret-top? Watch." The sentinels stood atop the precipice in white, and their Master called, "Go to God!", and at a given signal, the white-robed figures, without hesitation, threw up their hands in salutation and flung themselves down into the foaming torrent. They fell through the abyss from this life into the Paradise of the next. "If you wish," said he to the astonished Count, "all my white ones shall do the same."

The Count shrank from the proposal, and candidly avowed that no Christian prince could presume to look for such obedience from his subjects. When he was departing, with many valuable presents, Sabbah told him, "By means of these faithful warriors, I rid these lands of their enemies. Be they Moslem, Christian or any other creed. It matters not." The Old Man had this titular King of Jerusalem's mind in manacles under his hypnotic gaze and he whispered something strange. "Now you should know I have legions of men throughout these lands, each one of them ready to do my bidding with the same ardour. Can your master, say the same? And he asks me to surrender to his sovereignty! This is your answer. Go!"

The Count turned whiter than he already was and his mouth quivered in fear before he solemnly recognised that the Order's army was indeed the strongest, because it did everything on command and had no fear of death, but in fact welcomed it. And so, we gained the Count's respect even though they were at war with the armies of the Holy Land.

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Upon the deaths of many sunken moons, Sabbah, the man shrouded in legend and beheld as a God, the man who had taken me from my family as a boy, was now dying in his bed. This

man, I had come to perceive in my dreams, had been lying to me, to my brethren, from the moment of our rebirth. All of this meant nothing. There was no Nizari cause. It was all a grand ruse. Polo was right, the hashish, that poppy seed of sorcery, was part of this magician's trick. My whole life, everything I had given for this illusionary cause, was a lie. I had reaped untold death upon these flayed lands, all for nothing. I stood now by the bed in which he would soon pass.

“Sinan, I have watched you grow from a boy to a man in so short a time, it fills me with as much sadness as pride.”

“Stop with the theatrics, Hassan. But how could you lie to the men, to me, for so long? We have given our lives to you! For what, this lie?”

“My child, this was never a lie, just another manoeuvre in strategy and guile to give us everything we could ever dream of – our own worldly paradise. Remember, my child, that you too have both Heaven and Hell within you. This is the necessary contradiction in the world. There are no universal truths or principles of existence. We are the pawns, and Heaven is the player. This is plain truth, and not a mode of speech. We move about the chessboard of the world. Then drop into the casket of the void.”

“What do you speak of, Hassan? Be clear!”

“One thing at least is certain – this life flies. One thing is certain and the rest is folly – the flower that once is blown forever dies. This moment is your life. Everything turns to dust and falls into nothingness, from ants to galaxies.”

“Your Garden be damned, it doesn't exist, it was all a fevered dream. My whole life has been a fevered dream. You have enslaved us all, you deceived us. I'm taking the men to Assyria – Masyaf – before the Khanate comes! The yellow tide of death! I loved you like a father, like a God! All this talk of peace and uniting the people was nonsense, you just wanted the gold

and the power. This is the truth is it not? And I was always a mere pawn to do your bidding. But what of these things that cannot be explained - what of the talking head?"

"It was but a man buried up to his neck and covered in goat blood."

"No... you lie."

"I do not. What use do I have for more lies when my death is nigh? A deep, narrow pit sunk into the ground and at the bottom, a platform on which he stood in such a way that his head and neck alone are visible above the ground. Around the neck I placed a circular dish in two pieces which fitted together, with a hole in the middle. This awed those who needed strength in their convictions. In order to erase any implausibility, I had the blood poured around the head, on the plate."

"So just like the brothers you commanded to leap to their deaths, you killed him with your intoxications? His head was on a stave outside your chambers and paraded around!"

"Yes, later I severed the head in real earnest. I placed it on a stick afterwards for all of the faithful to see. These things are necessary to keep the men in line. If one did not have fervency in our cause, he surely did now. It is why I am, who I am. The men do not see me even as their King or Caliph, they see me as their *God*."

"*Your* cause... A mere conjurer's trick! A treacherous deceit! A man? You killed one of my brothers, a *fidais* who would die for you, give his life for your empty ideology, for a trick! You never cared for any of us. You are motivated solely by your own greed and thirst for power. You are no Imam. You are no D'ai – you are a false prophet."

"You know how I love you as a father loves a son. You have always perceived more than anyone else. You were always the wisest and most powerful. Rashid ad-Din Sinan, you are my successor. You are the Old Man of the Mountain. "

“Are you listening to me at all, you with addled mind? You have built for me a prison whose walls are made out of mirages of my deepest fantasies. A prison all the same. The end for you is come.”

“Yes, my child, but heed these words, my last, as they will serve you well as Grand Master. All my life I’ve been searching for proof. I’ve found proof.”

“What words? Proof of what?”

“That nothing is true, and everything is permitted! Go now to the alcove behind the curtain, it holds the secrets. Ah, I’ll rest now, yes. The endless dream calls to me. Come! Send me from this world!”

I plunged my dagger into his heart. He then breathed in his last, exhaled deeply and expired. His bright eyes, which had radiated with all the knowledge of Heaven and Earth, turned black like two coals. I watched the death of my world. The khanjar he had gifted to me was buried in it to the hilt. The Old Man’s spirit floated away up beyond the crescent moon. The lights of mountain villages dotted the jagged horizon. I believe that they too saw his spirit drift away and vanish into the night air and its infinite sea of stars.