

The Thread of Reason

A Novel by
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Cover illustration based on “The Assassination of Nizam al-Mulk” in Rashid ad-Din Tabib, *Jami al-tavarikh*, Topkapi Museum, Istanbul, Hazine Library Manuscript #1653, folio 360b (14th/15th century).

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THE THREAD OF REASON

PROLOGUE

NEAR THE VILLAGE OF SAHNEH, KERMANSHAH PROVINCE
FRIDAY, 10 RAMADAN 485

Jalali Date: 29 Mehr 471

Julian Date: 15 October 1092

O *Allah! There is nothing easy but what You make easy, and if it be Your will, You change the difficult into the easy.*

Silently, Abu Tahir recited the invocation and surveilled the scene around him. The wavering orange torchlight created the illusion that the tents were breathing. *Allah preserve me from those torches*, he thought. They killed his night vision, and that was going to complicate his escape.

He had chosen the third row of the crowd—close enough to the front to push forward when the time came, not so close as to be conspicuous. The people around him were mostly poor, their coarse woolen garments belted tightly against the October chill. Many gripped small scrolls of paper. If only they could get their petitions into the hands of Nizam al-Mulk, the grand vizier, he could put a sack of flour by their cooking fire, rebuild their ruined mosque, or punish the local emir who took more in taxes than the Shari'ah allowed.

But a row of soldiers barred their way to the great man. Beyond the pointed Turkish helmets, Abu Tahir could see him talking to the so-called Master of the World, the sultan Malik-shah, their two figures framed in the rectangle of light that marked the entrance to the sultan's pavilion. Nizam al-Mulk looked exactly as Abu Tahir expected; it was reassuring that the description he had received from his sheikh had been accurate. The Nizam wore a simple robe of fine silk, the scarlet and ivory chessboard collar its

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only ornament. A carefully groomed white beard and an immaculate white turban framed his face; Nizam al-Mulk was simultaneously elegant and austere.

But Abu Tahir had expected the sultan, Malik-shah, to be taller. He had never seen a sultan in real life. He and Qutayya used to devour the stories in the *Shah-nama*;² the rulers in them were always “tall as a cypress tree, with a face like the full moon.” Malik-shah resembled a steppe-dwelling shrub more than a stately cypress: knotted and tough (despite his flowery silk robes), but stunted by the wind-cursed climate of central Asia. As for his face, it was round enough, but after a lifetime of hunting and war, it had tanned far darker than any full moon.

Qutayya. Why did he have to think of her tonight? He wished he had back all the hours that he had spent with her at her parents’ low table, their little legs folded under them on the cushions, the *Shah-nama* open between them to one of its colorful illustrations. He remembered the lock of black hair that used to come loose from under her hijab as she leaned forward to turn the pages—he had brushed it back for her with his fingers many times. But Rostam and Khosrau and the other heroes of the *Shah-nama* were infidels, cursed to live in the Time of Ignorance, before the Messenger Muhammad, may the prayer and peace of Allah be upon him. They knew not Allah, so they were not the sort of heroes Muslim children should read about. And Abu Tahir certainly shouldn’t have read books with pictures in them. The Hadith was clear about that.³ *Instead of reading the Shah-nama, I should have been studying more Hadith. And Qutayya should have been helping her mother. It was wrong of her father to teach her to read. That was how the trouble started.*

The memory of Qutayya made him tense. He fell back on his training. *Think about Allah at all times and you will find serenity. Give every silver dirham of effort to your task and Allah will be pleased with you.*

He looked back toward the entrance to the pavilion. Malik-shah and Nizam al-Mulk were still talking. At this distance, Abu Tahir couldn’t distinguish the sultan’s words, but he was clearly furious about something. As for Nizam al-Mulk, he seemed unfazed.

* * *

“I serve at your pleasure, O Master of the World,” Nizam al-Mulk said. “If the service I offer is no longer satisfactory—”

“It’s *not* satisfactory,” Malik-shah interjected angrily. “It’s not satisfactory at all. It’s *sikking unsatisfactory!*”

“Then of course I won’t stand in the way of whomever the Master of the World names to replace me. I’m an old man. I’ve served you for twenty years and your father before you for ten. My retirement is long overdue. I’ve never been on the hajj. Nothing would please me more than to travel to Mecca and spend the rest of the days Allah has allotted to me sweeping out the Kaaba.⁴ And it will be a great opportunity for you.”

“Opportunity?” Malik-shah asked nervously.

“A *great* opportunity. It will take my replacement some time to learn all the lessons of governing that it took me a lifetime to acquire. In the meantime the Master of the World would necessarily need to be more involved in day-to-day affairs.”

“What affairs?”

“Oh, the minutiae that fills my days. How many dinars to mint and how many to borrow. How to cover payrolls until the taxes come in. Determining which reports from our spies to believe. It’s all quite fascinating. Although I’m afraid it would cut into your hunting time.”

Then Nizam al-Mulk fell silent.

The trouble with men who like to talk is when they finally shut up it throws everyone off. As the silence dragged on, Malik-shah grew increasingly uncomfortable. Desperate for something to say, the best he could come up with was “There’s no need to be hasty. My displeasure is with your grandson. I never said anything about being dissatisfied with *your* services.”

“Well, I’m glad that’s settled,” the Nizam replied. He peered off into the western sky, as if looking for some landmark. But no landmarks were visible. Even the stars were in hiding, washed away by the light of the torches and a setting moon about two-thirds full. “I believe we’ll reach the Zagros Mountains tomorrow,” he said. “That puts us in Baghdad on the twenty-second or the twenty-third, *inshallah*.” If it be the will of Allah.

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“So another twelve days or so,” Malik-shah said, grateful for the change of subject. “Is everything set for our arrival?”

“Ben Samha is taking care of it. The palace will be ready. He also reports that construction of the Mosque of the Sultan is on schedule. The foundation is complete. You’ll tour it while you’re there.”

“I still can’t believe you put a Jew in charge of the mosque.”

“If there’s one thing I’ve tried to impress on the Master of the World over the years, it’s always to hire the best man for the job.”

“When do we see that *peech* al-Muqtadi?”

“If by that vulgar expression you mean the Commander of the Faithful, we’re expected at the Dar Calipha during the afternoon of Eid al-Fitr. Any time the sultan and the caliph get together is an occasion. But this will be one for the history books. Between the festival and the—”

“Never mind. I only asked because I want to make sure there’s time for hunting.”

“Affairs of state first, O Master of the World. But as soon as we’re finished with the caliph . . .”

“Just make sure the quivers are full and the game is teeming.”

Nizam al-Mulk embraced the sultan farewell and, leaning on a cane, walked slowly to his litter, which awaited him in the road in front of the pavilion. The four bearers—all dressed in brown caftans over orange robes and pointed Turkish caps with broad, turned-up brims—snapped to attention as he approached. They raised the litter a little higher, the better for the old man to ease himself into the seat. The Nizam took his time settling into the cushions. Then he ordered, “To my wives’ pavilion,” and the bearers set off at a trot along the central avenue that ran through the sultan’s encampment.

They passed one tent after another. A ring of troops jogged along with them like a protective shell, although their commander was intimidating enough to keep unwanted intruders away all by himself. He was tall with a powerful build; the thick leather cuirass that girded his chest and torso made it seem more powerful still. He marched with precision; his gait told the world that he was a lifelong soldier, born to obey orders. But the fierce way his eyes glared above his long, white mustachios and the even fiercer way that he wielded his long, bronze-headed mace carried a warning: the commander giving the orders better be worthy. He maintained pace at the front, accompanied by Fakhr al-Mulk, son to the Nizam.

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The tide of petitioners alternately washed up against the moving formation and retreated from its advance, all the while jostling to get the attention of the man at its center. “Nizam! Nizam!” they yelled, waving their little scrolls of paper over their heads.

Fakhr al-Mulk noticed a white-haired woman in a ragged shawl, struggling to keep up. “That one, Yalbard,” he ordered the commander.

Yalbard looked crestfallen. “She’s just an old woman,” he said.

“Don’t let my father hear you say that,” said Fakhr al-Mulk. “Unless you want the speech about how the regime exists solely to serve old women—especially poverty-stricken old women. He usually accompanies it with a long story about a starving widow and the caliph Omar, may Allah be satisfied with him. For myself, I’m not satisfied with him at all; I’m tired of that story. I have heard my father tell it a thousand times. He included it in his book, which I had to edit. And it’s required in the curriculum in the nine universities he started, which I have to inspect. I prefer to forgo the torture of hearing it again.”

“As you wish, sir. But I was hoping for someone more imposing.”

“Whatever for?”

“So the Nizam knows what sort of people we guard him from.”

“That’s the genius of picking the old woman.”

“How’s that, sir?”

“When my father sees her approach, he’ll know you kept all the imposing people away.”

Yalbard hadn’t thought of that. Happy now, he signaled to his men with a vigorous thrust of his mace. A soldier broke ranks and hustled the woman through the gap in the circle, then sealed it up again before the rest of the petitioners could rush in. Not that they didn’t try.

“Stand back,” Yalbard shouted. “No one gets through unless I say so!”

The old woman prostrated herself in the dust in front of the litter and held up her petition. Nizam al-Mulk raised his hand for the procession to stop. He took the scroll from her hand and bid her rise.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“My name is Baysan. I come from a village near Nahavand.”

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Nizam al-Mulk scowled. Nahavand was fifteen farasangs away—a few hours by post horse, but a five-day journey for an old woman on foot. “Bring something for her to sit on,” he ordered.

A soldier found a wooden box in a nearby tent. When the woman was settled, Nizam al-Mulk asked, “What brought you all this way, Baysan?”

“Food, my lord. I don’t have any.”

The Nizam gestured for her to continue.

“My husband and I had two sons, but they both died of smallpox when they were children. So it was only my husband and me. Five years ago, he died too.”

“Then you’re a widow.” The Nizam looked up and addressed the crowd at large. “There’s a famous story about the caliph Omar ibn Khattab—may Allah be satisfied with him—and a widow.”

Fakhr al-Mulk groaned. “Damn,” he whispered to Yalbard. “He’s going to tell it anyway.”

“One night, the caliph was riding on patrol near Medina with Abu Zaid ibn Aslam. Seeing a fire in an abandoned building, they went to investigate. They found an empty cauldron on the fire, two sleeping children, and their mother cursing the name of Omar. He asked what had brought her to this ruin in the middle of the night. ‘O sir,’ she said, not recognizing him. ‘I’m a poor widow and I can’t afford food for my starving children. So I brought them out to this abandoned building so my neighbors wouldn’t hear them cry. I put the cauldron on the fire and told them to go to sleep, and when they wake up, a feast will await them.’”

“‘What will you do when they wake up?’ Omar asked.

“‘Tell them the same thing all over again.’”

“Omar rode off to fetch sacks of flour, rice, and peas, and a jar of cooking oil from his own house. Abu Zaid wanted to help him carry them, but Omar wouldn’t hear of it. ‘You can bear this burden of victuals today, Abu Zaid,’ he said. ‘But then who will bear the burden of my sins on Judgment Day?’”

“When they got back to the ruin, the caliph made the stew himself while the woman made the bread. The children were fed. ‘How can I ever thank you?’ the woman asked.

“‘I ask only one thing in return,’ Omar replied. ‘Do not curse the name of Omar.’”

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A buzz of appreciation passed through the crowd. Those who had heard the story before buzzed the loudest. Turning back to the widow, Nizam al-Mulk said, “Tell me, Baysan, was your husband your only means of support?”

“I was his, my lord. He never did amount to much. I was a seamstress, embroidering fabrics and selling them to the passing merchants. But my eyesight is not so good. I can’t sew anymore. I had a few dinars, but they ran out this summer. And so now I have nothing to eat.”

Nizam al-Mulk called out his orders. “Give her one hundred maunds of flour, one hundred maunds of rice, and one hundred maunds of peas,” he said. “And enough oil to cook it.”

“But I can’t carry all that,” the widow protested. “Six donkeys couldn’t carry all that!”

“And give her seven donkeys.”

The woman took his hand and kissed it. “May Allah bless you for your generosity.”

* * *

Abu Tahir didn’t share the murmured admiration of the crowd. Generosity with the public treasury was no generosity at all. He had heard the tales of the massive Shah Diz fortress, on the outskirts of Isfahan. Few could enter, but everyone knew what was inside: the royal treasury. Millions of gold dinars, the rightful property of the Muslim community, hoarded by the sultan and his vizier.

As the procession resumed its forward progress, Abu Tahir hurried along with the rest of the petitioners. He remembered the things he had seen on his travels. His sheikh had instructed him to observe carefully how the Seljuqs had defiled the land. He obeyed scrupulously.

In Qazvin he saw an army settling in for the winter. Having attempted to besiege the fortress of Alamut, and failing miserably by the will of Allah, the soldiers gave themselves over to besieging wine shops and brothels, with somewhat more success. In Saveh the mosque library was defiled by a collection of astrolabes and celestial spheres—instruments of foreign sciences that sought to uncover what Allah had made hidden.

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But the city of Hamadan was the worst. For two weeks he waited for the sultan to arrive on his way to Baghdad. Abu Tahir had been too anxious to stay in the safe house; he spent the time walking around the city.

The stalls of over two hundred moneylenders blighted the marketplaces. The Quran was unequivocal about what Allah would do with them: *Those who devour usury . . . are the fellows of the Fire, and they shall dwell therein for aye.*⁵

Some thirty thousand spawn of the Cursed Tribe made their homes in Hamadan's Jew Town. Some of their houses stretched to four and five stories—much nicer than most of the Muslim houses. The Jews traveled on horseback with comfortable saddles. They wore no identifying patches on their clothes. Apparently Nizam al-Mulk's regard for the caliph Omar didn't go so far as enforcing the Ordinance of Omar.

Truly it was an age of heresy, atheism, and decadence. Abu Tahir was blessed that his sheikh, by the grace of Allah, had chosen him to be the instrument that would kill not merely a man but a corrupt, sin-infested, spiritually impoverished civilization.

* * *

"Now that we've given my father his obligatory impoverished widow," Fakhr al-Mulk said, "let's have some fun. Those two men over there look more prosperous than the others. The way they're glaring at each other, they should provide us with some amusement."

Yalbard gave the order to let them through. This time Nizam al-Mulk did not stop the procession. The petitioners had to trot alongside the litter. One of the men was middle-aged, the other quite advanced in years.

"I know you," Nizam al-Mulk said to the younger of the two. "You're the qadi of Borujerd. We met when I gave you your diploma of investiture. Why have you come here tonight?"

"To defend myself from this quack, my lord. Not satisfied with spreading lies about me all over Borujerd, he now brings his falsehoods to you."

Nizam al-Mulk regarded the other man sternly. "The qadi is the senior judge in the city," he said. "A false attack on him is an attack on the law itself. Are you sure what you say is justified?"

“Justified, validated, and warranted, my lord.”

“He called you a quack. Are you a physician?”

“For forty years, my lord. During the summer, this man called me to his house to treat him for a fever. Which I did, with cooling foods and a preparation of willow bark. He recovered completely and then refused to pay me.”

The qadi interrupted angrily. “Everyone knows the treatment for fever is bleeding. You have to get the heat out of the blood. If I recovered, it was because it was the will of Allah, and not a potion he made from trees. As far as I’m concerned, he agreed to treat me and then didn’t deliver.”

“When you preside in your own court,” Nizam al-Mulk asked, “what punishment do you give to those who do not keep their agreements?”

“The whole of commerce depends on people delivering on their promises. So I punish breach of contract severely. The offending party must meet his obligations three times over. Then he must ride an ass through the streets of Borujerd for not less than three hours, bareheaded and dressed in sackcloth, and carrying a sign that says, ‘This is the fate of those who break their agreements.’”

“A just punishment indeed,” said Nizam al-Mulk to the qadi. “And that is the punishment I give you.”

The qadi hesitated. He fell a couple steps behind the litter and scrambled to catch up. “Don’t you mean that’s the punishment you give the doctor?”

“No, I mean you. You drank his prescription and you recovered. The doctor delivered on his end of the agreement. On top of that, when you didn’t pay the doctor, you counted on him having no recourse, since his complaint was against none other than the chief officer in charge of enforcing the law. There is no practice that stinks to Allah more than abuse of power by those charged with administering His shari’ah. I have always taken the gravest view of such offenses. You will pay this physician three times what you owe him and be shamed in the streets of Borujerd as you would have shamed him. Further, you are relieved of office immediately.”

The former qadi tried to argue. “But I’ve done nothing wrong. I told you the truth. My recovery was entirely due to the will of Allah.”

“I believe you,” said Nizam al-Mulk. “Nothing on earth happens except by the will of Allah. Including your punishment.”

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* * *

As if Nizam al-Mulk knows anything about the will of Allah, thought Abu Tahir. But he's going to find out.

The procession hurried by a gap between the tents, a side street. Abu Tahir strained to see where it led, but the view was as black as a caliph's shawl. As he feared, the torches were destroying his night vision. Once he crossed the border into the shadows, he would have to stumble in the dark until his eyesight recovered. The sluggish seconds would ooze away like pitch. Plenty of time for a fatal mistake.

He had listened attentively when the sheikh told him to prepare for martyrdom. But he didn't believe it then. Now he considered the possibility in earnest: he might never return to his home. The hero's welcome he had imagined for himself, the congratulations of his sheikh, and the glow of pride on Qutayya's face—none of it may ever occur. And the thought made him happy. In a matter of minutes he would be with the Messenger Muhammad and his Companions, may the prayer and peace of Allah be upon them. For *those who are slain in Allah's cause, their works shall not go wrong; He will guide them and set right their mind; and will make them enter into Paradise which He has told them of . . . a blissful place—gardens and vineyards, and youthful girls with swelling breasts and a brimming cup.*⁶

He noticed the tension in his face and hands and the anxiety in the pit of his stomach. The sheikh had warned him to expect this too. *Be thou patient then; verily, Allah's promise is true!* He reminded himself that his sheikh wouldn't have chosen him for this mission if he doubted the outcome. "If I had two men like you," his sheikh had said, "I could turn the empire upside down." He submitted to the exercises the sheikh had given him to achieve tranquility. Breathe. *La ilaha illa-llah.* Breathe. *La ilaha illa-llah.*

He started to inch his way to the front of the crowd. It was a painstaking process, slipping between the other petitioners, making progress a finger's-breadth at a time. Finally he reached the first row. The only thing between himself and Nizam al-Mulk was the circle of soldiers. *There are so many of them, he thought. But, then, the Muslims were outnumbered at Badr and won a glorious victory. When Allah decrees the outcome, what do the numbers matter?*

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He felt for the dagger in his sleeve, tried the point, and ran his finger along the edge one more time. It was sharp enough. *To kill with a dull knife is forbidden. An animal must not be made to suffer.*

La ilaha illa-llah. La ilaha illa-llah. La ilaha illa-llah. It was time.

* * *

They noticed him at the same time, the Sufi mystic who had suddenly materialized in the front row of the crowd. He was a young man, only nineteen or twenty, but his beard, tapering to a point, was well filled in. He wore the pale blue robe of the ascetic; its many patches, along with his ragged white turban, were witnesses to his vow of poverty. His face was smooth with the serenity of one who gives little thought to this world. Maybe his body still lingered here, but his mind was already in the Garden of Paradise. It was a look that men of action like Fakhr al-Mulk and Emir Yalbard could never understand, and so it filled them with respect. They nodded to each other. Of course they would let him through.

He took his time approaching the litter. The hem of his robe dragged in the dust and flattened tufts of grass. His feet were barely visible; he seemed to glide preternaturally across the ground. When he saw the petitioner, Nizam al-Mulk ordered the procession to stop again. All eyes were on Nizam al-Mulk and the Sufi, their faces orange in the torchlight. Sensing the change in their neighbors, even the loudest members of the crowd abruptly stopped their conversations and looked around, confused, to see what was happening. The crowd stood in religious silence, as if gathered around a sacred fire.

The Sufi was now an arm's length away from Nizam al-Mulk, who had traded his usual bearing of authority for one of humility. To receive a Sufic *baraka* during Ramadan was a double blessing. "*As-salamu alaykum,*" he said. Peace upon you, friend. Then he began another story for the benefit of the crowd.

"When I was a young man," he said, "I served an emir who was brutal; he cared for nothing but his wine and his dogs. One day a Sufi said to me, 'Serve a man who will do you good. Do not serve today those who will be eaten by dogs tomorrow.' Of course, I did not know what that meant, but true to the Sufi's prediction, I found out the following night. The dogs killed

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some trespassers on the palace grounds. The emir, who had been drinking as usual, stumbled outside to see what was going on. Not recognizing him, the dogs attacked and tore their own drunken master to shreds. It became clear to me that the Sufi possessed knowledge that our conventional methods of inquiry cannot fathom. Ever since, I've been a patron of Sufism.

"And so," he said, turning back to the petitioner, "how may I serve you, blessed Sufi?"

Using his right hand, the Sufi reached into the left sleeve of his robe as if to retrieve a petition. Nizam al-Mulk held out his own hand to receive it. But instead of a petition, a dagger gleamed in the Sufi's hand. "Serve with your life!" he yelled.

Then, with a war cry of *Allahu akbar*, he thrust the knife into Nizam al-Mulk's chest with all the strength that months of training had given him. Clothes and skin were no obstacle to the blade's sharp point. It scraped past a rib. He felt the resistance of the heart, the resistance of a chunk of raw meat pierced by a cooking spit. The killer angrily drove the knife deeper. The force of his attack caused one of the bearers to stumble; the litter and its occupant listed at an odd angle.

When the killer yanked the dagger out, a spray of blood came with it, soaking the sleeve of his dagger arm and spattering his face.

Then he ran.

* * *

The viciousness of the murder is what made his escape possible. For one long moment, everyone was too shocked to react. Their hesitation lasted just long enough for him to plow down a guard and muscle his way out of the crowd.

As Abu Tahir fled down a darkened side street, he prayed for Allah to keep him from tripping on an exposed root or a stray item of baggage. His head start was slim; already he heard Yalbard, his wits recovered, ordering the men to give chase. The killer pushed himself to run faster.

Before his conversion, he had been seduced by wine. It had turned him away from Allah, precisely as the Quran had warned; it was the *abomination of Satan's work*.⁷ And yet he persisted in trying to capture that one brief phase of drunkenness that made him very, very happy. That was

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how he felt tonight, with no intoxicant other than his faith. He had done it. The painstaking planning and hard physical training, the journey to Hamadan and the anxious weeks spent there, the farasangs of stalking the sultan's caravan and the wait for just the right moment—they had paid off. Tonight he had succeeded not only at killing a man; he had declared jihad against an empire.

Spurred by giddiness, Abu Tahir tore between the rows of tents. Most were dark; a few had light leaking through the seams. In an open area that served as a kitchen, he glimpsed servants kneading bread for breakfast. Beyond that, music floated from a tent. As he rushed past it, he saw through the open flap a sable-haired beauty plucking the strings of a lyre while four or five couples in various states of semi-dress embraced on brocade-covered couches.

He heard the shouting and tramping of his pursuers, but he was too well trained to turn to see how many there were—or how close. Doing so would slow him down. Instead he tried to evade them by rounding a corner into another street. This one was completely dark. The black outlines of the tents were in sharp focus; his night vision was returning. His torch-wielding pursuers had no such advantage. Allah was with him. All he needed to do was stay beyond the range of their light.

A tree loomed. He grabbed the trunk and pivoted himself around another corner. Instantly he realized his mistake. The alley he had turned into ended with a rectangle of bright light. But it was too late to turn back—his pursuers had already rounded the corner behind him and blocked his escape.

He ran toward the light at the far end of the alley and burst into a square; it turned out to be a food market. Merchants were setting up their stalls; they would be ready when the faithful arrived before sunrise to buy their *suhur*, the predawn breakfast, in advance of the day's fast. Fruit sellers unloaded apples and dates onto plank tables. Porters lugged sacks of barley and rice. Zigzagging to avoid one porter, he crashed into another, knocking a sack of lentils to the ground, where it split open and spilled. He pushed onward. In two seconds he dashed across the open space to the far end of the square, where he leaped over a table, disappeared down another alley, and ran past a large tent.

A guy rope was stretched from the corner of the tent to a wooden stake jammed into the ground. But with the light of the market his night

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vision was destroyed again and he didn't see the rope. He just knew that his foot had caught on something, and he was sprawled in the dust with brutal pain where his chin hit. Then army boots and sword points surrounded him.

A soldier grabbed Abu Tahir's wrist and twisted it until agony made him drop the blood-covered dagger. Another soldier frisked him roughly from head to foot. When it was certain he had no other weapons, he was ordered onto his knees, with his hands clasped behind his head.

Several more squadrons marched up with torches amid shouting and confusion. Yalbard arrived and barked orders in Turkish to command his men into a semblance of order. Just in time too: the beat of hooves was heard and the soldiers parted to make way for an elegant horse bearing Sultan Malik-shah.

Yalbard handed the dagger to the sultan. Malik-shah turned it over several times and inspected it thoughtfully. The blood was already dry.

He prodded his horse forward, toward the prisoner. The horse stamped uneasily; Malik-shah calmed it with the reins.

The prisoner looked up at the sultan. Malik-shah didn't look so short now, glaring down at him angrily from his horse. In fact, he looked terrifying.

Abu Tahir remembered the story of how the sultan's father, Alp Arslan, had died. When a prisoner with a knife had broken loose and rushed him, Alp Arslan decided to show off. He ordered the guards to stand down and faced his attacker one-on-one. But the attacker got lucky—Alp Arslan slipped, the attacker stabbed him, and the teenaged Malik-shah ascended to the throne.

Allah had been on the killer's side earlier tonight and struck down Nizam al-Mulk. Perhaps Allah was still on his side and his capture was part of a larger plan. If only he could goad Malik-shah's well-known vanity, it might afford him the opportunity for a second assassination.

Abu Tahir locked eyes with the sultan and he knew: Malik-shah was thinking about his father as well.

But Malik-shah had learned from his father's folly and wasn't taking any chances. He quietly uttered two words:

“Kill him.”