

The Djinn

Graham Masterton

It began with a curious investigation of an ancient Arabian jar and the strange legends of sorcery it symbolised. Then legend and logic demand that the jar be opened - the secret of the djinn must be exposed to the light of reality.

'It swirled in the smoke and seemed to melt and shift. Out of the fog of poppy incense loomed a black, bulky thing like a monstrous leech, with blind eyes and a pale, disgusting maw. Anna lifted up her silver crescent again, and spoke some clear, ringing words in Arabic. As quickly as it had transmogrified itself into the leech-beast, the djinn twisted and turned in the smoke and started turning itself into something else.

'We saw a dim shape like a huge rat, but then Anna spoke the words again, and again the djinn changed. Soon she was chanting the words continuously, and before us, in the gloom, we saw the whole terrifying and revolting range of Thieves that Ali-Bahah had imprisoned in his jar. There were things that shuffled and crept; things that had mouths of ragged teeth; things that twisted and coiled; things that ran on hairy legs. Like a horrible hallucination, the mythical terrors of an age that was lost and forgotten more than a thousand years ago were brought to life in front of our eyes . . .'

THE DJINN

A Star Original

'Max's death had something to do with that old Arabian jar," Marjorie said. 'Max said it had strange properties, that it made singing noises. He took all our portraits down, he said we shouldn't have any in the house. He even took the labels off the groceries and burnt them if they had pictures of people on them. He was always going on about that jar. When I threatened to smash it he locked it away in the turret.'

'I think old Max was imagining things,' I said.

'But the way he died,' she said simply, 'it wasn't very nice. I woke up last Thursday night and found he wasn't there. I heard people talking in the kitchen downstairs. At least I imagined I did. Then I heard terrible screeching. I can't tell you how awful it was. It went on and on for about three or four minutes, perhaps longer. I went downstairs. I don't know how I had the courage to do it. I thought he was all right at first, because he was turned away from me. Then I realised what he'd done. He had taken out the carving knife and cut off his face. His nose, his cheeks, even his eyes. And he had done it himself.'

It is sometimes said that travelers on the road to Bagdad were beguiled at night by strange voices. The voices were said to sound variously like the wind, or like seductive women, or at times like animals of a kind which no man had ever seen. The wise men of the time said these were the voices of jinni, or djinns, and that hearing them, a traveler should hurry onward for the sake of his sanity and his life.

-Abdul Hazw'halla The Book of Magic

Prologue

"It is said by many that when the days of the N'zwaa were almost at an end, they gathered in the temple where they had once worshiped, and with ritual and song, they stored away in scrolls, in sarcophagi, and in jars the dreadful secrets that had given them sway for so many centuries. It is also said that he who discovers the secret of Nazwah the Unthinkable ma) become the most powerful man in the known world and beyond; yet that he must be prepared to pay the price. For as the courtesan exacts a levy for her carnal services, so does the magical apparition of Nazwah the Unthinkable demand its fee, and for many that fee may be well beyond their means."

-Legends of the Persian Sorcerers, Volume IV, Chapter III

"Archeologists working on the site of an ancient temple at Naswa, Iran, are now convinced that 'a careful selection' of the priceless artifacts that were once buried there have already been removed by thieves.

"The temple was supposed to have been the site of a savage cult of genie worshipers who, according to legend, were all-powerful in the region for at most three centuries. Their rites involved the invocation of demons and human sacrifice, and as Professor W. F. Collins of the British Archeological Fellowship recently remarked: 'They were, on the whole, a rather unpleasant bunch.'

"But what is worrying the fifteen-man team on the site of the dig is that many of the most precious jars and scrolls they could have hoped to have found have already been expertly stolen-possibly as long ago as the 1930s. The thefts considerably reduce the archeological interest of the dig, and Professor Collins fears that many of the items may have been destroyed or exported to other countries.

" 'We know that many of the artifacts were actually there,' he said in Isfahan yesterday. 'The temple was almost completely buried in a landslide of eroded mud about forty or fifty years after the genie worshipers abandoned it, and one can still see today the impressions made by many of the pieces when the mud dried around them. In particular we are missing what appeared to be a complete set of scrolls, a selection of ritual knives and swords, and two jars-one a small incense pot and the other a very large jar with decorated sides.'

"What particularly puzzles the archeologists is that many very valuable items have been left untouched. These include the discovery of a woman's body, mummified by the mud so that her skin and hair remain preserved. So far Professor Collins has been reticent about this find, and would make no further comment until he had seen the results of carbon-dating tests and physiological studies."

-The London Sunday Times, October 12, 1968

Kensington, London

May, 1969

Dear Inspector Kashan,

I promised to let you have the results of the tests on the cadaver found at Nazwa as soon as possible, and here they are. You will probably be relieved to hear that you do not have a recent homicide on your hands, although there are some facets of the woman's death which would make an unusual (if rather grisly) investigation.

The body is contemporary to the abandoning of the N'zwaa temple and is therefore at least twenty-five centuries old. It is the mummified cadaver of a young woman of about nineteen or twenty years old-not a particularly beautiful young woman if the preserved skin is anything to go by, but judging from her jewelry and hair, she was the daughter of quite a respectable family.

It is the way in which she met her untimely end that we find most extraordinary, and we cannot find any record of similar deaths anywhere in our historical texts or libraries. She died as the result of the introduction into her private parts of an object of enormous size, which compressed her internal organs into her rib cage and probably led to instantaneous death. What the object actually was, we cannot guess. It was introduced with sufficient force to separate the pelvic girdle into two halves and push the entire visceral content of the body into a quarter of its usual displacement.

Perhaps by looking through your own historical records you might find some similar death recorded, but my colleagues and I are resigned at the moment to leaving the poor woman's death an unsolved mystery.

Yours sincerely,

L. Pope

"It is truly said that truth is often found in bottles; but it is even more truly said that out of old bottles come old truths."

-Persian Dialects, p. 833.

THE DJINN

Chapter 1

It was a sweltering hot day in mid-August, and we all gathered at Restful Lawns Cemetery in our heavy black suits and stiff collars, looking like a party of overdressed lobsters. In movies, funerals are invariably held in a steady downpour, with black umbrellas and tears mingling with the rain. If there were any tears at this gathering-which I didn't notice-they were thoroughly mingled with unsentimental sweat.

The deceased was probably the most comfortable person there. He lay in an expensive casket of polished light oak with rather attractive shell-pattern handles, its lid laden with lilies and roses and

orchids. It was more like a dismal flower show than a funeral, and regardless of our somber faces, all anybody could think about was getting our late friend buried and going back for a cool can of beer.

The priest stood over the open grave and said his bit. The widow dabbed her eyes with a little lace handkerchief. Then the coffin was lowered into the hard-baked soil, and we all self-consciously threw lumps of mud on the lid. I didn't like to throw mine too hard, in case it disturbed him. He was better off where he was.

We walked away through the gleaming white forest of immobile angels and marble headstones. There was a strange hot stillness that made me feel we were all going to suffocate. The black limousines were waiting for us, with discreet purple drapes at their windows; we climbed in and sat facing each other, trying not to smile.

We drove at a sedate speed along the Array Highway and on to Cape Cod. It was just past eleven when we arrived at Winter Sails, the deceased's rambling white wooden house on the deserted south shore. The limousines rolled up the weedy gravel driveway, and we all got out and stood in the mild sea breeze, waiting for the widow to invite us inside.

I was surprised to see how dilapidated Winter Sails had become. It was a Colonial-style house, built around 1800, with an elegant pillared verandah all the way around. Sometime in the early part of the twentieth century, the owners had added a Gothic turret overlooking the grassy beach and topped it with a weathervane in the shape of a scimitar; it squeaked mournfully every time the wind changed, which was often. The house was screened from the Hyannisport road by a row of twisted trees, all leaning away from the sea like a gaggle of frightened old ladies. But the once elegantly secluded estate looked distinctly shabby these days, with peeling paint and broken gutters, missing tiles, weed-riddled pathways, and overgrown lawns. There was a sundial on the wide west lawn, which had always intrigued me when I came to Winter Sails as a boy; but it was barely visible now through the long waving grass.

Marjorie Greaves stepped out of the last limousine in her black suit and black-veiled hat. She was a small, faded woman in her mid-fifties, with a prominent beaklike nose and dark, close-set eyes. She had always reminded me of a shrimp, and shrimps had always reminded me of her, which was why I rarely ate them. It is not nice to consume one's godparents, even by proxy.

"Hello, Harry," she said wanly, taking my hands in her own black-gloved fingers and looking up at me with those two little black eyes. If she had been weeping, it didn't show,

I nodded and smiled. "It was a very dignified service," I said. "Most dignified."

She smiled and looked away as if she were thinking about something else altogether. "Yes," she said. "I suppose it was,"

We stood there for a moment holding hands as if we were about to dance. Someone took a photograph of us. Then Marjorie smiled again and went off to talk to some of the other funeral guests. There were nearly thirty people there, none of whom I knew very well, and I was looking forward to being introduced. There were some elderly ladies, who were always good for business; a few prosperous-looking men; and a particularly tasty young lady in a tailored black suit and a black turban hat whose startling red lips and wide green eyes made me think she might be worth knowing. Socially, of course.

Marjorie Greaves ushered us all into the house. It was as run-down inside as it was out. The wallpaper was stained with dampness, and the carpets were worn right through to the gray string. There was a square hallway with a black-and-white tiled floor, which led through to the largest room in the house, a long drawing room with tall windows facing the sea, I remembered that this room had once been filled with flowers and expensive antique furniture, but now it had nothing more than two chintz-covered settees which looked as if they ought to be put out in the field with retired horses, and a few rigid little rush-bottomed chairs. Even the oil paintings were gone from the walls, leaving dark rectangular marks all along the light green wallpaper.

Marjorie's companion, an absent-minded young woman with spectacles, very prominent teeth, and an unfailing loyalty to long baby-pink cardigans, had made some small sponge cakes with cherries on top as well as a tuna fish flan, which she served with three bottles of sherry.

"In death even as in life," muttered one of the prosperous-looking men. "A goddamned tightwad."

"George!" said his wife reprovingly.

"Well," said George, whom I instantly disliked, "that guy was so mean he used to stuff his Thanksgiving turkey with newspaper."

Over in the corner, another couple were discussing the state of the house in stage whispers.

"He must have been down to his last dime," said an intense woman with ginger hair. "I never saw this place look so bad."

"I always used to think he was a millionaire," sniffed her husband, who was bald and paunchy. "I thought the guy had money to burn, but he certainly didn't burn any around here."

Marjorie herself got into conversation with a tall glum man, who said he couldn't keep his sherry down and stood drinking tapwater out of a teacup.

Miserable though it was, for me this funeral was something of a vacation. Usually, I work in New York, in the less-than-salubrious environs of Tenth Avenue, but when I received my black-edged invitation to bury my godfather, I was only too glad to get out of the sweaty city and head for the Cape. I don't usually have the money or the excuse to take a break, and this one, though morbid, was ready-made.

Not that I disliked Max Greaves. The truth was I didn't feel much of anything, because I hadn't seen either Max or Marjorie in years. In the days when my parents used to take me out to Winter Sails as a kid, Max was always cheerful and talkative, but as years went by he grew increasingly morose and difficult to get along with. In the end, I gave up trying. I sent Christmas cards and small birthday gifts, but I stayed away from Hyannis. It's no fun trying to hold a conversation with a grumpy old man.

One of the reasons I needed this vacation was that I had just broken off a long and frequently painful affair with a blond WASP named Alison McAllister. For a time, we loved each other, but then we did nothing but argue. One day I went into P.J.'s for a beer and saw her cuddling some Man-Tanned jock from NYU, and that was just about the end of it.

Another reason was that I was having a crisis of confidence about my work. My work is kind of difficult to explain, especially since I don't look like what I do. I mean, if you met a dignified but balding 33-year-old from Cleveland, Ohio, with a rather large nose and a tendency to squint at distant objects, you wouldn't automatically jump to the conclusion that he was a clairvoyant.

I used to be in advertising, but I gave that up after my agency was taken over and I lost two of my favorite accounts. I tried a couple of other jobs, like taking German tourists around Manhattan ("und hier ist das Woolworth Building") and even walking dogs. But in the end I kind of found my niche in fortunetelling for those homely old ladies who have plenty of money but not quite enough style to shop on Fifth Avenue. I decorated my apartment to look like a wizard's den (purple drapes and leather-bound books), and I placed daily advertisements in the New York Post. Business was always fair to moderate,

since I have a kind of a knack for making up exciting but very ambiguous fortunes, and an even greater knack for making old ladies feel that someone really wants them and needs them. I make enough to pay the rent and run a new Mercury Cougar, but not quite enough to take regular vacations.

The trouble was I was beginning to feel disillusioned with the spirit world. Sometimes you can really sense that there's something out there, something lurking in the mysterious beyond. But at other times, you get to thinking that it's all hokum, and that can make you bitter as a bottle of bock beer. For months now, I'd been turning over Tarot cards, peering at tea leaves, and feeling that my great occult talent had deserted me forever. That's another reason I came to Max's funeral. Maybe, in the company of recently departed souls, I would find the inspiration to carry on. On the other hand, maybe I wouldn't. Whatever happened, it was a change.

I managed to edge my way around the room and home in on the young lady with the red lips. From dose up, she was older than she first appeared, but also more attractive. She was short, but she had a more-than-bounteous pair of breasts and the kind of foxy-eyed look that always reminds me of Sophia Loren.

With my usual charm, I handed her my card. She lifted the smoky veil on her black turban hat and read it aloud.

" 'Harry Erskine. The Beyond Is My Business.' What on earth does that mean? "

"Well ... it means I tell people's fortunes. Old ladies, mostly. Like a clairvoyant."

"A clairvoyant? You mean, you look into crystal balls, that kind of stuff?"

"Well, not exactly crystal balls. I can do crystal balls, if you're interested. But generally it's Tarot and tea leaves. I'm also quite handy with the Ouija board. It's a living."

The girl looked at me oddly. "I never met a clairvoyant before. Do you really read the future?" "I guess so. Within limits. I think I've gotten better with practice. It's like anything else. You can't service an automobile without practice, and you can't probe the future without practice either. The occult is kind of delicate, you know, and you can't go blundering around the spirit world in hobnail boots."

The girl smiled. "No, I guess not. I've never considered it"

"Well, take it from me."

The girl sipped sherry. "Did you know Max Greaves very well?" she asked.

"Pretty well. He was my godfather. He was a close friend of my father's, way back at college or something. We always used to call him 'Uncle.' He was a pretty interesting guy."

"Nobody seems exactly heartbroken that he's dead."

I shrugged, "Well ... he got kind of cranky in his old age. He used to be real kind and gentle and generous when I was young. That's the way / recall him. I remember he gave me a terrific clockwork train outfit for my tenth birthday, and he never forgot to send me a Christmas card. But he turned into a recluse when he got older. Very short-tempered. I haven't seen him in years now. I suppose he was one of life's great characters, but he got like all great characters-more than a little hard to live with."

"What did he do?" asked the girl. "I mean, for a living?"

"He used to be in oil. Some independent refinery I think. I don't recall. But he spent most of his early life in Arabia-something to do with Mideast oil. That was before the days of Arabian oil politics, of course, when every white man was a big cheese. He used to have a lot of Arabian junk around the house, although it looks like it's all been sold. I used to like to play with his camel saddles. You know, the Lone Ranger, that kind of thing."

The girl raised an eyebrow. "Who played Tonto?"

"I never had a Tonto. I guess I've always been something of a lone Lone Ranger." "Not married?"

"Are you kidding? Can you imagine trying to support a wife and five kids on tea leaf readings?"

The girl said nothing; she just smiled. I finished my sherry. If you ask me, it was the amontillado that Edgar Alien Foe had bricked up into his cellar wall.

"Listen," I told the girl, "I know a terrific lobster restaurant just up the cape. How about lunch? That's if you're not too full of cakes."

"Sure," she nodded. "Perhaps you can read my future from cracked lobster claws."

"I'd rather read your palms. Or even the soles of your feet. By the way, I don't know your name."
"Anna," she said. "Anna what?" "Just Anna."

I sniffed. "That's very mysterious." "It's not meant to be. It's just the way it is." "All right, Just Anna," I said. "Let me have a few words of condolence with my godmother, and then we'll go off and eat. Don't get led astray by any strange men."

"I think that's already happened," she said smiling.

I left her for a while and made my way through the chattering guests to Marjorie Greaves and her doleful consort. They were talking about the inferior quality of today's kitchen equipment, and it seemed to me that anyone would be grateful to be rescued from a conversation like that

"Marjorie," I said, taking her arm. "Can we just have a private word?"

"Of course," she replied. "Excuse me, Mr. Gorst."

Mr. Gorst mournfully raised his teacup of water. "Naturally, Mrs. Greaves, naturally."

Marjorie Greaves seemed distracted. Not grieving or particularly sad, but anxious and thoughtful.

"Is everything all right?" I asked her. "You don't have financial problems, do you? I mean, the house-

She shook her head quickly. "It's nothing to do with money. I'm quite all right for money. There's no need to worry on that account."

"Marjorie," I said seriously, "the house is kind of run-down."

"I know," she said. She wouldn't look directly at me. "But it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter? This is an old house. If you don't look after it, it's going to collapse around your ears. All it needs is some repair-work on the roof and some of those gutters fixed."

"It's coming down anyway," she said quietly.

I frowned. "Coming down? I don't understand."

"I am having it demolished. When it is demolished, I shall sell the land for development. They tell me that, providing it's not down-zoned, I can build five houses to the acre."

"Well," I said, "that's your decision. I guess it makes sense. But I always thought you loved Winter Sails. It's a beautiful old house, Marjorie. It seems kind of sad to tear it down."

She shook her head. "It has to come down."

"What do you mean-has to?"

"I don't want to talk about it. It's a personal decision, Harry, and I assure you it's all for the best. Now I think I ought to talk to Robert before he leaves,"

I held her arm. Her skin seemed very cold through the thin black fabric of her funeral dress. It's always alarming to touch other people and find their body temperature radically different from your own. Like icy feet in bed or a fiery sunburn.

"Marjorie," I said, "I am your godson."

She looked up at me at last, with those intent, black shrimp's eyes. "Harry," she said quietly, "I really can't explain."

I bit my lip. "I think you ought to," I advised her. "I mean, Marjorie, look at this room. Where has the furniture gone? Where are the paintings?"

"They were portraits" said Marjorie. "We couldn't have portraits."

"You couldn't have portraits? What do you mean?"

Unaccountably, Marjorie Greaves began to tremble. It wasn't the deep spasm of sorrow or the nervous twitch of exhaustion. It was hysterical, paralytic fear. She was like a horse that senses a snake in the straw and shakes in terror.

"You'd better come outside," I told her, guiding her as quickly and calmly as I could through the gathered guests. From the other side of the room. Anna raised a querying eyebrow, but I stuck my hand up in the air with five fingers spread, indicating I'd be gone for only five minutes. She shrugged and nodded. At least my appetizing lunch date was secure, unless the miserable man with his cup of water got in there while I was away, but there wasn't much chance of that.

Outside, in brilliant sunlight, we walked across the overgrown lawns in silence and rested at last on a rusty wrought-iron garden bench. There was a view of the glittering, ink-colored sea, with the starched sails of yachts leaning on it; the crumbling old house with its Gothic turret; and the neglected gardens that ran down through the land; there was nothing but the sound of the surf and the weathervane squeaking

with every swing. Marjorie patted her graying hair straight, took out her handkerchief, and discreetly blew her nose.

"I've never seen you like this," I told her. "You seem frightened of something."

She folded her hands in her lap and stared out toward the seashore, saying nothing at all.

"I don't understand about the house," I said. "Didn't Max want you to keep it? Didn't he leave you some kind of trust fund for it?"

Marjorie didn't answer. She sat as if she were posing for a formal portrait, with her black funeral shoes side by side in the grass like a pair of obedient Labrador puppies.

"Well, I don't know," I said resignedly. I took a pack of cigarettes out of my black vest pocket and found they were crushed into S-shapes. I straightened one out, lit it with my trusty Zippo, and blew the smoke across the lawn.

The scimitar-shaped weathervane went squeeekkk, squeeekkk, squeeekkk.

After a few minutes, Marjorie said, "Max was not himself toward the end."

I nodded. "Is that why he didn't settle anything about the house?"

"Oh, no," she said. "He was quite sure about the house."

"You mean Max wanted it demolished, too?"

"Oh, yes, he was quite sure about that."

"But why? What's the point of tearing down a historic house like this? Max loved it!"

Marjorie sighed nervously. She seemed very jittery, and it was obviously an effort for her to sit still.

"He never explained everything. He said that he would only tell me what I needed to know for my own safety."

I laughed. There was nothing notably funny in what Marjorie had told me, but I thought I ought to bolster her confidence by showing her how carefree and debonair I was.

"It sounds to me like one of Max's little jokes," I told her. "You really shouldn't worry about it. I think you need a little holiday more than anything else. It's a big strain, looking after a sick man."

She stared at me coldly, and my smile leaked out of my lips like air dribbling out of a balloon.

"It wasn't a joke," she said, "and he wasn't sick."

"But you just said he wasn't himself." "I didn't mean that he was sick." "Then what did you mean? You're speaking in riddles."

Marjorie picked at the edge of her thumbnail where her nail polish was chipped. When she spoke, her voice sounded very dry and deliberate, and I had an unsettling feeling that she was doing her utmost to tell me the truth.

"It was something to do with the jar. Do you remember the jar?"

I nodded. "Sure. You mean the one he brought back from Arabia, the one with the blue flowers and the horses and everything? Yes, of course I do. It used to be one of my favorite things when I was a kid."

"Well," said Marjorie carefully, "there was something about the jar that none of us knew. Max knew, but it was only toward the end that he told me. The jar was-well, it was strange." "What kind of strange? You mean rare?" "No, no," she said. "It had strange properties. At certain times, it used to sing. I mean, it made singing noises. I never heard it, but Max said he did. It was usually at night. He said he went up to his study once, at two or three in the morning, and the jar was singing."

I frowned. "Singing? Singing what?" Marjorie shook her head. "It wasn't a particular tune or anything, but it really used to sing, or so Max said. He went up several times after that, in the night, and it was singing."

"I guess it was a freak. You know-wind blowing across the mouth of the jar, something like that."

"No," said Marjorie adamantly. "Max said he thought of that, and he put the jar in the attic. It still went on singing. Anyway, the top of the jar was sealed with wax, if you remember, so it couldn't have made a noise."

I thought for a while, smoking my cigarette. "Maybe there was something; inside of it-spices or something-and they made a gas that was leaking out of the seal."

"Then why just at night?" asked Marjorie. "Why didn't it sing all the time?"

"Because the surrounding air is colder at night-time," said Albert Einstein the Second. "The pressure inside the jar was relatively greater at night, so the gases inside it were forced out"

Marjorie shrugged. "I don't know, Harry. All I know was that Max began to grow very-peculiar. He was nervous and worried, and he often complained of headaches and biliousness. He spent a lot of time in his study, and he said he was writing his memoirs or something, but I never saw any writing and he never showed me any. I asked him about it quite often, but he always said he had a great deal of research to do before he actually put pen to paper. I was very worried about him. I tried to get him to see the doctor, but he always said that the sickness would pass."

I watched a two-masted yacht in the distance, bouncing through the foam. Overhead, an airplane droned, circling Hyannis Airport.

"What about the paintings?" I asked her. "Why did he take all those paintings down?"

"I don't know. He said we must. He said it would be a great mistake to leave any kind of portrait or photograph in the house. He had all his books taken away, in case there was a picture in any of them, and he had all our tapestry furniture removed."

I tossed away my cigarette butt "That sounds very weird indeed. What would he want to do a thing like that for?"

"He said there were pictures of people on the tapestry furniture, so we couldn't leave them in the house. There were to be no portraits of any kind, ever. He used to look through the groceries to see if any of the packets had pictures of people on them; and if they did, he used to soak off the labels and burn them."

"Marjorie," I said. "It really sounds as if Max was-well. . ."

"I know!" she said simply. "That's why I didn't want to tell anyone what happened. Nobody liked him much anyway, in his later years. He was a very hard man to get on with. He was always fretting and nagging and losing his temper. I've had six or seven years of it, Harry, and I don't mind saying I'm almost glad he's gone."

"Mmmm," I said. "I can understand." Marjorie shook her head. "That's more than I do. He was always going on about his beastly jar. He almost used to talk as if it were a privileged guest who mustn't be disturbed, I was always telling him to get rid of it, but he said he couldn't. I threatened to smash it once, and he almost went mad with rage. In the end, he locked it in the turret."

I turned my head and stared across at the Gothic turret on the ocean side of the house. Its windows were dark and vacant, and on its pointed roof, the weathervane squeaked monotonously.

"You mean-it's still there?"

Marjorie nodded. "He sealed the door. I used to like going up in the turret to sew. You know what a beautiful view it has. But he insisted on sealing the jar inside, and he wouldn't let me go near it. I know it sounds absurd, and I used to think sometimes he was completely mad, but in everything else he did, he so obviously wasn't. There was something about the jar that worried him, and he felt he had to lock it away."

I scratched my head. "I'd like to see it."

Marjorie immediately gripped my hand. She went quite pale and I was almost sorry I'd spoken.

"Oh, no-you mustn't do that. Please, Harry. Max said specifically that the jar was not to be touched. We were to burn down the house and not to touch the jar."

"Burn the house down? Marjorie, this gets nuttier by the minute. I think the best thing we can do is have a look at this old jar of Max's and see what he was so worried about. I mean-maybe it has some diseased old clothing in it or something, and Max was concerned that we'd all get infected with some Arabian plague. For Christ's sake, you can't be afraid of a jar?"

"Max was."

I sniffed. "I know, Marjorie, but I'm not. And I don't really think it's the wisdom of the East if you commit arson on your own property for the sake of some ancient pot that's probably full of preserved figs."

At that moment, Anna came walking across the unkempt grass, her veil fluttering in the mild sea breeze.

"Who's that?" asked Marjorie. "Is she a friend of yours?"

"A newly acquired friend," I said. "Her name's Anna. I met her just now."

Marjorie seemed to be right on the verge of asking me another question, but Anna came up and stood a

few feet away, and she changed her mind.

"I don't like to rush you," she said, "but it's past one o'clock, and I'm getting awfully hungry."

"Is that the time?" said Marjorie. "I didn't realize."

"I promised to take Anna to lunch at the Plymouth," I explained. "I want her to experience their broiled lobster tails."

"Yes, they're very good," Marjorie said. "It's been a long time since I went to the Plymouth."

"Come with us," said Anna. "I'm sure Harry would like to treat his godmother as well as a perfect stranger like me;"

I glanced up. Anna was extremely attractive, but right then I could have kicked her in the shins. The last thing that was going to enhance my seductive style was the fretful presence of Marjorie Greaves, babbling on about jars and portraits and food labels. My fantasy of spending a warm and cozy lunchtime at the Plymouth, followed by a brief drive to the beach for a little tussling in the sand, began to evaporate fast. I looked across at her lynx-eyed, red-lipped, dark-haired, delicious face and pulled the sourest smile I could. All she did, the provocative bitch, was pull an even sourer smile back.

Most of the funeral guests were leaving as we got back to the house, and we waited while Marjorie said her farewells and accepted their condolences. The sun was hotter than ever, and inside my black suit I was slowly melting away. By the time we were ready to go, I felt five pounds thinner.

The Plymouth was one of those quiet, elegant restaurants in a small, well-manicured Cape Cod community. There was a colonial church just across the street, with a gilded clock, and a neat village green which looked as if it had been trimmed with nail scissors. Under the spreading chestnut tree nestled the white-painted Plymouth Restaurant, where we sat at a dark oak table behind eighteenth-century windows and enjoyed the attentions of a fussbudget old lady with a country apron and a talent for dropping crackers in your lap.

Anna and I both ordered the lobster tails, and then I strolled up the street to buy a bottle of Chablis to

drink along with them. It was a roasting hot afternoon by then. A black-and-white spotted dog lay under a nearby tree with its tongue lolling out, and not far away, the local cop rested in his car, his hat tilted forward and his eyes closed.

When I got back to the restaurant and sat down, I found that Anna and Marjorie were talking about Max's ridiculous jar. Marjorie was just explaining about the jar being sealed in the turret, and Anna was listening with rapt attention.

"Oh, God," I groaned. "Are we back to that again? Honestly, Marjorie, I think you'd be better off if you threw the damned thing away and forgot all about it."

Anna looked offended. "I think it's interesting," she said. "Perhaps it's a magic jar."

I uncorked the Chablis and filled our glasses. "Sure, and this is magic aphrodisiac."

Anna sipped her wine. "It doesn't taste like it to me. What did it cost? Seventy-five cents a bottle?"

I looked at the label. "I'll have you know this is genuine 105 percent French Chablis from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Drink twenty bottles of this and you won't know what hit you."

Our food arrived. The lobster tails were as juicy and buttery as they always were, and the lettuce was crisp and fresh. Marjorie stuck to a cottage cheese salad, but then I guess it's not every day you bury your husband, cantankerous old bastard or not. We ate in silence for a while.

"You know something," said Anna. "I think we ought to investigate this jar."

"That's what I said," I told her. "I'm sure it's a perfectly natural phenomenon. There's an explanation for almost everything that seems like it's occult."

"I don't agree with that," retorted Anna. "I think it's magic. But I do think we ought to have a look."

Marjorie didn't look at all happy about that idea. "Max did say not to touch it," she reminded me. "I'm not trying to fool you, Harry. It worried him more than anything ever worried him before."

"That's what I don't understand," I said. "Max was always so pragmatic. Why should it worry him so much?"

"Maybe it was black magic," said Anna. "The Arabs were tremendous wizards in their time."

I poured some more wine. Marjorie hadn't even touched hers. If I were her, I would have been as drunk as a skunk by now, but then Marjorie had always been a gentle, realistic woman. She sat there, bowed over her half-finished cottage cheese salad, like a meek shellfish that had found itself lunching in a seafood restaurant and was trying to eat discreetly in case it was spotted and devoured by its fellow diners.

"I think, quite seriously, that we ought to have a look at this jar," I told her. "You can't set fire to the house anyway. It's against fire regulations."

"Max did insist," she said anxiously.

"I know Max insisted, but Max is-well, Max is no longer with us. It's pretty hard to insist on anything from Restful Lawns."

"I think Harry's right, Mrs. Greaves," said Anna. "You can't let the whole thing get you down like this. Perhaps your husband was right, and there is something strange about the jar. You really ought to find out what it is."

"I don't know," said Marjorie. "I just don't know what to do."

"Leave it to us," said Anna reassuringly. "Harry and I will go take a look at the turret this afternoon, and we'll find out what this whole jar business is all about. If you like, we'll take it away and sell it for you-won't we, Harry?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. I mean, there's no sense getting worked up over some hideous old piece of pottery. Really, Marjorie, I believe Max was imagining things. Maybe he was overworked or something."

"He was retired," said Marjorie curtly.

"Well, that's it," I said. "A lot of active men start feeling useless and unwanted when they retire. Perhaps he invented this jar business to give himself something important to do. He was suffering from strain, that was all."

Marjorie was very pale. She dabbed her lips with her linen napkin, then laid it neatly on the table.

"I think I ought to tell you something," she said.

"Sure. Anything. We'll understand."

"I don't know whether you'll understand this. Nobody else does. It's only because of Dr. Jarvis that I've been able to keep it quiet."

I frowned. "Keep what quiet, Marjorie? Is there something wrong?"

Marjorie lowered her beady little eyes. I reached my hand sympathetically across the table, but she didn't take it.

"It was the way Max died," she said simply. "It wasn't very nice."

I looked quickly across at Anna, and she looked back at me. I was just going to say something, but Anna raised her finger across her lips and silenced me.

"It was last Thursday," Marjorie continued. "I woke up in the middle of the night and found that Max wasn't there. That wasn't unusual, especially in recent years. He often wandered around the house at night. I lay there for a while and listened to see if I could hear where he was. Then I felt thirsty, and I got up to have a drink of water from the bathroom."

Marjorie's voice was so soft I could hardly hear what she was saying. Her head had sunk down and her lips were barely moving as she told us what had happened.

"I was just filling my glass when I heard people talking in the kitchen downstairs. At least I imagined I did. I wondered who it was. One of them sounded like Max, but I don't know who the other one was. I think now that it was just my imagination. I had my drink, and I was going back to bed, when I heard terrible screeching. I can't tell you how awful it was. I was absolutely paralyzed with fright I couldn't move. It went on and on for about three or four minutes, perhaps even longer. I went downstairs. I don't know how I had the courage to do it, but I did. It sounded so much like Max, and I was terrified that something had happened to him." Marjorie stopped for a moment.

"Have a drink," I said. "It'll make you feel better."

She shook her head. "I mustn't drink. I'm afraid to get drunk."

"Come on, Marjorie. A couple of swallows won't hurt you."

She shook her head again. "It's forbidden, you know. They don't allow it."

"Who doesn't allow it?" asked Anna. "What do you mean?"

I held Marjorie's wrist "Don't worry. Just tell us what happened when you went downstairs."

Her voice was almost indistinguishable now. All I could see of her head was the gray-streaked part in her hair as she mumbled her story.

"I went into the hall and he wasn't there. He wasn't in the drawing room, either. It was silent by then, completely silent, and I was terrified. Then I saw the light was on in the kitchen. It was shining from under the door. I opened the door very slowly, and . . ." She stopped talking, and stayed silent and still for almost a whole minute.

"Marjorie," I said gently. "You don't have to..."

But she started speaking again, in the same hushed, whispery voice.

"I thought he was all right at first. I don't know what made me think that He was turned away from me, I suppose, and the first thing I saw was the back of his head. Then I realized what he had done." Again, she stopped.

"What?" Anna asked. "What had he done?"

Marjorie looked up. For the first time that day, there were tears in her eyes, although her voice was almost emotionless. I don't know why, but that calmness made her words even more nauseating.

"I don't quite know how he did it," she said. "He had taken the carving knife from the drawer and cut his face off. His nose, his cheeks, even his lips. He had done it himself."

Anna sat with her mouth open in shock. "Excuse me," she said, leaving the table as quickly as she could. As for me, I just sat there holding Mar-jorie's hand, feeling those lobster tails swimming around and around, fighting like hell to keep them down.

Chapter 2

By the time we got back to Winter Sails, most of the funeral guests had left. There was one old lady who was busy talking to Marjorie's baby-pink companion with the jutting teeth, and a florid-faced oil executive who was sitting with his head between his knees (he had brought his own hip-flask), but apart from those two, the old house was deserted. The guests had left nothing but tire tracks, empty sherry glasses, and dirty ashtrays.

"I think I'm going to have a cup of tea," said Marjorie, leading us to the drawing room. "Will you join me?"

I shook my head. "I don't drink tea. It's bad for the stomach lining. You know, in China, they used to make eunuchs drink hundreds of cups of tea every day, then they cut them open and would use their stomachs for footballs."

Anna gave me a sharp nudge in the ribs.

"I'm sorry," I said. "That wasn't in very good taste."

Marjorie sighed. "Don't worry, Harry. The quicker I get back to normal, the better it will be. I feel I've been living apart from the world for years with Max. We were so isolated. I used to insist on doing all my own marketing, just to get away from the house and meet some ordinary people. Miss Johnson, will you bring us some tea, please."

The baby-pink lady looked up. "At once, Mrs. Greaves," she said quietly.

"How long has she been around?" I asked, when she'd left the room. "I don't remember her."

"She came from an agency," said Marjorie. "She's very quiet and a little strange, but I don't know what I'd have done without her."

"She reminds me of someone," said Anna almost absent-mindedly, "but I can't think who."

"She's very retiring," said Marjorie. "Sometimes; I wonder if she's happy."

We all sat down on the uncomfortable settees. The florid oil executive was muttering something to himself about Jesus Christ, and the old lady who had been talking to Miss Johnson was rummaging around endlessly in her woven handbag, so there didn't seem to be an urgent need to socialize with them.

"This jar," I said, lighting a cigarette. "Can you remember where Max originally found it?"

Marjorie shook her head. "I wasn't with him on every trip. He bought it in Persia, I think, from a merchant. He used to have everything crated up and sent back to the United States, and I was quite used to having all these mysterious boxes arrive from Arabia. If they arrived when he was away, I just stored them until he got back, I never opened anything. To tell you the truth, I was never awfully excited by Arabian antiques."

"Did your late husband keep a diary when he was in Arabia?" asked Anna. "I mean, do you think there might be a clue to what the jar was and where he found it?"

"I really don't know. He has hundreds of notebooks in his library upstairs. You might discover something in there."

"You haven't looked yourself?"

"Well, no. When he was alive, he never allowed me to. And now he's dead and-well, I have no desire. I'll be very glad when the whole thing is forgotten and finished."

We changed the subject while Marjorie drank her tea. The trusty Miss Johnson was as parsimonious with her lapsang-souchong as she was with her sherry, and the tea came out of the pot the color of unwashed windows. Still, it seemed to revive Marjorie, and when she had finished and eaten a leftover piece of cake, she took us up to Max's study.

The upstairs rooms of old wooden houses always smell musty and hot on summer days, and Winter Sails was no exception, even though the skylights were open and the sea breeze was blowing through the windows. Marjorie led us along the bare, narrow hallway which ran the whole length of the second floor (as a boy, I used to scamper up and down that corridor, pretending to be a B-47 bomber on its landing strip). She unlocked a door on the landward side of the house and ushered us in.

It smelled of dusty old papers, ancient typewriter ribbons, and stale tobacco smoke. I remembered that Max Greaves used to smoke an immense meerschaum pipe with the face of a scowling Arab on it. Books and papers were stacked haphazardly all the way up the walls of the room, and the desk under the window was covered with yellowed documents, leather-bound volumes, pencils, maps, Arabic dictionaries, and God knows what else. The wastebasket was overflowing with crumpled pieces of paper, and there were piles of Arabic newspapers and magazines on the floor. I picked one up and saw that every photograph in it had been clipped out and presumably thrown away.

"Max was never very tidy," said Marjorie from the doorway. She stayed outside the study, obviously with no desire at all to come in.

"Tidy?" I said. "It looks like he kept his own private tornado."

"Look at whatever you want. It's of no interest to me. Now that Max is gone . . . well. . ."

Anna put her arm around Marjorie and gave her a consoling squeeze. "Don't worry, Marjorie. We won't disturb you at all."

I started to shuffle through some of the papers on the desk. There were news clippings and diaries, old shipping tickets and folders crammed with carboned sheets. I really didn't know where to start. Before she left us, Marjorie handed me a key. I recognized it from my childhood days, because it was always

kept hanging on a hook next to the turret door.

"This is for the turret when you need it," said Marjorie. "I'm afraid Max put seals on the door as well, so you may have trouble getting in. That's if you're still determined to do it."

"You'd still prefer us not to?" asked Anna.

"After what happened to Max, I think the best thing is to destroy the whole place," said Marjorie flatly. "I have no curiosity left."

"All right," said Anna. "We'll try to be discreet."

Marjorie stood there for a while, saying nothing. Then she nodded and walked off down the hall with the heavy tread of someone who has resigned themselves to their fate-whatever that fate might be. It didn't do much to bolster my enthusiasm for probing through Max's papers, but on the other hand, I felt we owed it to Marjorie to discover what had happened to him. One day, when she was over the shock, she would want to know the truth.

Anna began combing the shelves on either side of the narrow study. Strangely, she seemed to know just what she was looking for, because she tugged out various papers and folders with quick and certain confidence. I stopped raking through the papers on Max's desk to watch her, and the more I watched her, the more convinced I was that she was after something specific.

After she found a box folder full of background material on Persian pots and jars, I sat down on the edge of the desk and folded my arms.

Anna looked up. She held the stack of papers and files against her breasts and smiled nervously. "What's the matter?" she said. "You look very anxious about something."

I nodded. "I am. I'm anxious to know who you are, and what you're doing here. It suddenly occurred to me that you know just what you're up to, yet neither Marjorie nor I know who you really are. Apart from Just Anna, of course."

Anna looked at me seriously, "Would you believe me if I told you? I mean, I didn't tell you because you wouldn't believe me. You're a very cynical person,"

I sniffed. "I don't think my cynicism is anything compared to yours, my dear. You have just deceived a grieving widow on the day of her late husband's funeral. If you can think of anything more cynical than that, I should send it off, if I were you, and win a prize."

"Well," she said, "if you really want to know, I suppose I'll tell you." "I wish you would."

"My name is Anna Modena. I am what they call a consultant in exported antiquities."

I shook a cigarette out of my crumpled pack and lit it "That sounds about as legitimate as 'clairvoyant' What exactly does a consultant in exported antiquities do?"

Anna opened the box file and laid it on the desk. She leafed through the stale old papers inside and pointed again and again to lists of Arabian antiquities that Max had brought back from the Middle East

"Max Greaves took away from Persia and Saudi Arabia and Egypt some of the most valuable and interesting ceramics, figurines, brasses, and pots that you can imagine. He collected most of them in the 1930s and 1940s, when the prices of such things were comparatively low. At that time many black-market traders could be persuaded to acquire them from museums, from ancient tombs, and even from the private homes of Arabian collectors. Most of the antiquities that Max Greaves brought back to the United States-in fact, most of the antiquities that most collectors bring back to Europe and America-are technically stolen."

I puffed at my cigarette placidly. "Go on."

"Things have changed now," she said. "The balance of financial power favors the Arabs rather than the Europeans or the Americans. So many Middle Eastern countries are trying to get their priceless antiquities back to restore them to the national museums and historic sites where they belong. It is my job to help them track down their missing property and return it to Arabia."

"I see," I said calmly. "So you knew about this jar all along."

She nodded. "It is very old and very valuable. It is mentioned in Abdul Hazw'halla's Book of Magic, which was supposed to have been written in the fifth century before Christ; it is also referred to in the legend of Hassan i Sabah. There is a drawing of it in the Cairo Museum, and even though the drawing is a copy from the original sketch, the copy itself is more than a thousand years old."

"You said it was mentioned in the Book of Magic" I said quietly. "Does that mean it's supposed to have magic properties? You said yourself you believed it was magic."

Anna sighed. "I don't know. The jar is mentioned so briefly that it's impossible to say. But that's the implication in the text"

"Magic?"

She opened her black pocketbook and took out a folded photostat. Without a word, she handed it to me and I opened it.

It was a fragment of Arabic text. Since I don't read Arabic, or even pretend to, it looked like a march of cup hooks to me. But underneath there was a typewritten translation.

"Read it," she said. "It's a little flowery but interesting."

I took a drag from my cigarette and then I read out loud. "In the latter days of King Hama, the court magicians, in the style of old, kept by them certain jars, which were known as jars of the jinni, and mastered the art of the jars, from which emanations unknown to mortal men were seen. No one knew from whence these jars came, and no one save the court magicians themselves knew their mystery, although it was said that they were bound by certain songs and sealed by certain incantations. The greatest of all the court magicians was Ali Babah, and his jar of jinni was said to contain the most powerful of all emanations, though it was never seen to be opened, and Ali Babah himself said that what his jar of the jinni contained could not be looked upon. The jar of Ali Babah was decorated with the horses of Nazwah the Unthinkable and the opium flowers of. . ." I stopped reading and held the photostat up. "Is this a joke?" I said coldly.

Anna shrugged. "Do you think it is?"

I flicked the paper with my fingertips. "Ali Babah? What about the forty thieves-or did you leave the other thirty-nine at home?"

Anna took the photostat back. "That's unfair," she said. "I'm employed by the Iranian Department of Culture to do a perfectly legitimate job. I'm returning stolen property, not housebreaking. Anyway, if you were that much of a mystic or clairvoyant or whatever you call yourself, you'd know that Ali Babah is mentioned in nearly all of the old Persian magical books. He was one of the most notorious black magicians in the whole Middle East."

"You mean, this is for real? You're trying to tell me it's true?"

She snapped her pocketbook shut. "I wouldn't have made the effort to come here if it weren't," she said. "As far as I can make out, Max Greaves somehow procured the original jar of jinni and shipped it back to America. You can see from the description that it's the same jar."

"A similar jar. How many jars have horses and flowers on them?"

"Thousands, I expect. But the horses of Nazwah the Unthinkable were very special. If you saw that jar as a child, you'll probably remember that they had no eyes."

I crushed out my cigarette and blew out the last mouthful of smoke. "Very well, they have no eyes. But for all I know, there are stacks of jars with pictures of eyeless horses on them. How do you know that this is the right one?"

Anna lowered her head. "I don't know. Not for certain. Not until I see it, anyway. But I admit that I'm worried."

"What about? You think that Marjorie will take offense to what you've done and kick you out? You have to admit you deserve it."

"No, I'm not worried about that I know she'll understand when I tell her. What really worries me is what happens if it is the original jar."

"Anna," I said. "You're trying to tell me that this jar is something special. I mean, what you're trying to say is that it's magic. Is that it?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying."

"But how can you-"

"Do you know what jinni means?" she said hotly. "Have you any idea what jinni are?"

I shook my head. Most people have this wonderful knack for making me feel ignorant

"Jinni," she said, "are more popularly known as genies. You remember Alladin and his Wonderful Lamp? You remember all the stories of genies trapped in bottles? Jinni were the demons of Arabia, the powerful spirits of the elements. There were jinni in the rocks, in the water, in the skies, in every part of ancient life. Some were capricious and some were not, but in those days it didn't matter so much. The hierarchy of Arabian magicians had learned how to control and punish jinni by spells and sorcerous riddles. The worst thing you could ever do to jinni was to take away their freedom and seal them in some enclosed space-like a lamp, or a jar, or a bottle. That's why you have all those stories about people letting jinni out of bottles and the jinni being eternally grateful and promising to be their slaves forever. That, unfortunately, was a fantasy."

I scratched my ear. "Like everything else you've told me?"

Anna turned away. "I can't make you believe me. I can only tell you what these stories are, and that I've come across many Iranians who believe they're true. Just because all this happened a long time ago doesn't make it a fantasy."

"All right," I said. "Supposing it isn't a fantasy. What is so worrisome about our particular jar? Apart from what happened to Max Greaves, of course, and I don't really see the connection."

"I don't know," said Anna. "That's what I wanted to find out before we tried to approach it or open it. Forewarned is forearmed, isn't it?"

"But how can anyone know what genies really did, if they ever existed? It says in that piece from the Book of Magic that the court magicians kept the jars 'in the style of old' and that was written five centuries B.C. I mean, we're not going to find anyone who remembers how it was back in the bad old days of genies."

"We have the fairy stories and so on. We also have several occult Arabian books."

"And what do they tell us?"

"Not a lot. But they do say that the jinni, once released from their confinement, were usually angry and vengeful and almost impossible to control. Ali Babah's jinn was supposed to be the most powerful of all jinni, so I guess he was something to be reckoned with. The H-bomb of his day."

"Nothing else?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said, "There is something else. Something important."

"I'm going to need convincing."

She shrugged, as if she didn't care if I believed her or not "Jinni would do anything," she explained, "to coax people to let them out of their prisons-their bottles or lamps or whatever. Often, when the magicians died, their jars of jinni would fall into the hands of people who didn't know what -they were, and the jinni would exert tremendous magical influence on the owners of these jars to set them free. Of course, once the stopper was out.."

She opened her pocketbook again, searched for a moment, then handed me a clipping from the London Daily Telegraph, dated April 26, 1951. It was headed "Tomb Thieves Suffer Whirlwind Justice."

It read: "Three Persian tomb robbers, escaping with ancient glassware and pottery valued at over \$500,000, were all killed by a freak whirlwind which engulfed their jeep. Eyewitnesses said that the robbers unaccountably took an extremely rough mountainside road, which smashed several of their stolen jars and plates. Almost immediately, they were tossed into the air by an instantaneous whirlwind, one of them up to a height of more than thirty feet. The whirlwind died away as abruptly as it had begun, and the men dropped to the ground. All died of severe injuries in the hospital."

I passed the clipping back. "It's interesting, sure," I told her. "But it doesn't prove anything."

She sighed. "Nothing, Harry Erskine, proves anything. This is pure theory, and I'm not pretending it's anything else. But I wish you'd at least try to keep an open mind."

"All right. Three bandits get caught in a whirlwind. I'm open-minded."

"I don't expect you to take all this for gospel, not on the face of it," said Anna. "I'm just suggesting a little caution, in case there is something about the jar that we ought to be cautious about. I know the stories about the jinni are ancient, and they may not be literally true. But the idea of the jinni may be an ancient way of expressing a fear about something else. A disease or an explosion. I don't know. I personally believe in magical influences, but even if you don't, you ought to take care. People don't issue warnings for 2,000 years without some good reason. And apart from that, the Arabs in the Sahara have a name for whirlwinds."

"Enlighten me."

"They call them djinns, or genies, or whatever way you like to pronounce it. They believe that whirlwinds are evil spirits, dancing in the wind."

I nodded. "All right. The whole thing seems kind of far-fetched, but if it makes you feel any better, we'll proceed with caution. The last thing I want to do is get caught up in some freak whirlwind."

Anna pulled across an old Windsor chair and sat down with the box file on her rather shapely knees.

"Since we can at least agree on that," she said, "let's go through whatever we've got here and see if we can learn some more about the jar."

"All right," I said. "I'll have a look through these diaries on the desk. Do you have any idea at all when this jar came into the States? It might help me find the right diary."

She was thumbing through a closely typed report on some Egyptian ceramics. "Around 1948 or 1949, I think," she said. "It was here when you were a kid, wasn't it? So think back to the first time you ever saw it."

I picked up a pile of glossy black diaries held together with rubberbands, "I'm only thirty-three," I told her. "Don't expect the memoirs of Elizabeth Jane Portman."

The diaries went back to 1954. I took a quick look through them, but they were mostly routine and uninteresting: "Took dogs for walk . . . had lunch with Binney . . . rough weather today . . . went for stroll on beach . . . English muffins for tea." Hardly the stuff that great biographies are made of.

I heaved a pile of Arabic papers across to the other side of the desk to see if there were any more diaries around, and tucked beneath them, I saw Max Greaves' old meerschaum pipe, its stem well-chewed and its bowl stained with tobacco. I lifted it up, turned it around, and got a cold shock that hit me like a wet towel. The face that was carved on the front, the snarling Arab that had delighted me so much as a boy, had been knocked clean off. Where the face once was, there was nothing but a broken flat edge. I stared at the pipe for a while, then I said, "Anna."

"Yes?" She was engrossed in some bills of lading from Port Said.

"Anna, look at this." I held out the pipe.

"What about it?"

"There used to be a face on here. A carved face, of an Arab, kind of grimacing. Someone's knocked it off."

Anna peered at the pipe. "Perhaps Max Greaves did it. He seemed to have a thing about portraits and pictures."

"Anna," I said patiently, "he used to love this pipe. He would never do a thing like that. And you don't break a pipe like this by accident. Not this way."

Anna stopped reading, "I wonder. ..."

"What do you wonder?"

"I wonder if there's more to this business about portraits and pictures than we thought. I wonder if it's got something to do with the jar."

I laid the pipe down. "That doesn't make sense. It was more like a phobia. That painter used to have the same kind of thing. What was his name? Goya, the Spanish painter. He used to worry that his paintings were coming to life. Maybe Max went a little screwy and thought his portraits were coming to life."

Anna shrugged. "Marjorie swore that he wasn't. Screwy, I mean. But he did kill himself, didn't he?"

I poked through some more papers on the desk, "More precisely, he cut his face off. Just like this pipe. Just like cutting out all these pictures in these newspapers. Just like taking the portraits off the walls downstairs. Whatever went wrong, Max Greaves didn't want a single face in the whole place. Not even his own."

"Try to find some more recent diaries," Anna suggested. "Maybe there's something in there."

I shifted some more papers and discovered some more notebooks bound with elastic bands. I ended up

combing through all of them, looking for anything that might give us a clue to what had happened to Max Greaves or explain the origins of his Arabian jar. Anna-being more expert than I was-leafed through the official certificates of export and shipment receipts.

The diaries seemed to be filled with the usual day-to-day jottings: "Went to Provincetown for lunch with J; quiet day v. foggy." But when I was halfway through his notebook for 1959; I came across an unusually long and closely written entry. It filled two pages, and parts of it were heavily crossed out and rewritten. It looked like the writing of a man who has suddenly decided to unburden his fears and hopes-emphatic and square in some passages, uncertain and tenuous in others. It almost looked as if it had been written by two different people. I read it silently to myself:

"This is not the first time I have been concerned about it. I often wonder if I should have left it behind. I suppose it is something of a challenge to a collector like myself, but on the other hand, it does require a certain knowledge to deal with such things. The old P. was absolutely right when he said that it had a resonance all its own. Lately it has sounded like more than that, and I confess I am tempted to see what's inside, no matter what they said about not looking and all those cautions. I don't quite understand how something like this could still have any influence after all these years, but I find myself thinking about it more and more often, and considering whether I ought to pry open the seal and see what's what. In some ways it is quite depressing, and I feel a sort of malaise coming over me whenever I look at it. I don't know how I can explain it to Marge, because she obviously thinks of it as ornament and nothing else. Should I tell her? It seems so ridic. somehow, and maybe it's just old age coming on."

I passed the diary to Anna, and after she read it, she said, "That's the jar all right. He knew what it was, and he was worried about it. Back in 1959, he was worried about it. He even knew what it was when he first bought it"

"How can you tell that?"

She pointed to the diary with her long, red-painted nail. " 'The old P.' could have been the old Persian. And look here-'no matter what they said about not looking.' Whoever 'they' were, they were obviously the people he bought it from."

"Well," I said reluctantly, "I'd have to agree with you there."

"There's something else that ties up," she said, producing the folded photostat again. "This bit about 'Ali Babah himself said that what his jar of jinni contained could not be looked upon.' That seems to relate to these warnings that Max Greaves was given about not looking at the contents of the jar."

I laid the diary down on the desk. Outside, dusk was falling across the pale lawns of Winter Sails, and the sea was disappearing in the evening darkness. In a half-hour, it would be pitch-black, and I didn't fancy checking up on a jar of jinni at nighttime. Not that I was frightened or anything like that, but I prefer to meet the supernatural on my own terms-in broad daylight, with running shoes on.

"I think we ought to go look at the jar itself," I said. "We might learn something about it here, but Max Greaves obviously didn't know a great deal more than we do."

Anna looked reluctant. It occurred to me that she actually believed in all this stuff about Arabian sorcerers, but for some reason I didn't feel like laughing at her. There are times when a laugh betrays your nervousness far more clearly than chattering teeth.

"Anyone for jinnis?" I joked. I held up the key to the Gothic turret and swung it around my finger.

Anna nodded. "All right I suppose it's the only thing we can do. You'd better go first; I don't know the way."

I opened the study door. "I thought you'd find some excuse to hide behind my coattails," I told her. "Anyone would think you were scared."

She lowered her head. "If you want to know the truth," she said, "I am."

I switched on the light in the corridor. "It's a jar" I told her. "A piece of hideous china. Nobody can tell me that anything sealed in a piece of hideous china for 2,000 years is going to harm anyone. Max Greaves was obviously a sick man. He was suffering delusions. Look at all that business about the curse of the mummy's tomb, when all those people were supposed to have died because they dared to open up the burial chamber of King Tut.

It was all bunkum. I believe in spiritual communication between living people, but don't tell me that Ali Babah's pot is going to make a man commit suicide. Think about it seriously. It just doesn't make sense."

Anna said nothing. She kept close behind me as we walked up the long carpetless corridor, right along the center of the old house toward the seaward side. Several of the electric light bulbs had burned out, and the corridor was very gloomy in places. On both sides of us, there were square and rectangular marks on the walls where the paintings had been removed. They had obviously been taken down hurriedly, because the crumbly old plaster was chipped, and the picture hooks had been left where they were, twisted and bent and rusty. The corridor was stuffy and humid; I loosened my black funeral tie and opened my collar.

"This is the creepiest house I've ever been in," said Anna nervously. "Does it have any ghosts?"

There was a scampering noise in the ceiling above our heads, and she seized my arm in fright

"No ghosts," I told her. "Just a few rats."

At the end of the house, the corridor formed a T-shape. One branch went toward the landward side and ended in a closed sash window which looked out over the front drive and the lawns. The other branch, no more than fifteen feet long, led to the Gothic turret. There was a light switch on the wall, but when I clicked it up and down, it was obvious that the bulbs had burned out here, too.

"Is that it?" whispered Anna. "That door down there?"

I stopped. "You don't have to whisper," I said loudly. "Ali Babah is safely tucked away in your fairy books."

Nonetheless, I walked the last few feet toward the turret with a reasonable amount of respect. When I reached it, I stood there in silence, tapping the key in my hand and examining with a worried frown what Max Greaves had done to seal it.

There was a heavy iron bar resting across the width of the entire door, held in place against the doorjamb by steel bolts. Brown sealing wax had been smeared into every crack and cranny around the door itself, and every few inches there was a massive, impressed seal with brown tapes embedded in it. I peered closely at the seals; they seemed to have been made with an ancient Arabic dye. There was Arabic lettering all over them, and a picture of a flying horse without a head. There was even Arabic writing scratched on the iron bar.

"What do you make of this?" I asked Anna. "We're going to need a crowbar to get in."

She came up and looked at the seals. Her lips moved silently as she tried to read what they said. "It's in very ancient language," she said. "There's something about holding down the winds or it could be spirits. The two words are very similar."

"You mean this is supposed to be sorcery? This room has been sealed off with magic spells?"

"Oh, there's no doubt about that," said Anna, running her fingers along the heavy iron bar. "I've seen this kind of thing before, in the mountain country of Hassan i Sabah. Whenever a man died of possession by evil spirits, they sealed off his tomb in much the same way. Max Greaves has obviously tried to keep the jinni trapped in the turret by enchantment. I expect the windows are sealed, too."

"This is ridiculous," I said. "Here's poor old Marjorie getting herself into a state of hysteria just because her late and very bad-tempered husband decided to play ancient Arab magician with a jar. I'll go downstairs and get a flashlight and a crowbar. We'll get this thing open if it kills us."

"Harry," said Anna anxiously. "I don't think we ought to. Not until the morning, anyway."

"Don't be so superstitious. Look, there's a lot about the occult I really believe in. I've seen it for myself. But I don't believe in this jar. All you have to do is wait here, and I'll be back in two minutes with a flashlight. If any mysterious Arabs try to pester you, just give me a shout."

Anna didn't look overjoyed at being left alone in the creepiest house she'd ever been in, but it wasn't going to help her morale or mine to let her come with me. She had to see for herself there were no ghoulies or ghosties or long-legged beasties at Winter Sails, and the sooner she did, the sooner we could amicably dispose of the jar. I walked back along the long upstairs corridor, past the open door of Max Greaves' study, and down the narrow flight of wooden stairs to the dim black-and-white hallway.

Oddly, there were no lights on downstairs, even though the blue gloom of evening was now clogging every room. Perhaps Marjorie was sitting in the dark, having the silent weep that she'd been bottling up in herself all day.

"Marjorie?" I said as I went into the drawing room and reached for the light switch. That one didn't work either, and the room remained in darkness. A fuse had probably blown, and I expected that Marjorie was fixing it.

I strained my eyes, trying to see where she was. It looked as if there was someone sitting quietly in one of the broken-down settees, or maybe it was just a coat that someone had casually thrown down. A moment later, the coat or the person seemed to have vanished. It was just a delusion of the dusk.

Feeling my way, I crossed the room toward the dining room door. It was half-open, and when I peered through, I could see the faint gleam of evening light on the dining table and the twinkle of glasses and decanters on the sideboard. I also had the feeling that someone in a hood or a robe was sitting at the far end of the table, his head lowered, but it was so dark I couldn't quite make it out.

"Marjorie?" I called. "Is that you, Marjorie? It's Harry."

I opened the door and the room was empty. But I had the strangest sensation that someone had just walked out of the other door, the door that led to the kitchen. It was the same kind of sensation you have when you're tired, and you think you've glimpsed something out of the corner of your eye. The corner of a robe, swishing silently away, or maybe a flickering triangle of moonlight.

I listened. Except for the creak of old timbers and the muffled squeaking of the weathervane, the house was unnaturally silent. I wondered if Marjorie and Miss Johnson had gone for a drive somewhere, just to get away from the funereal atmosphere of Winter Sails. But that didn't make sense; she would have told us before she went.

I was about to walk toward the kitchen when I thought I heard something rattle. It sounded like keys, or someone rattling cutlery in a kitchen drawer. I froze. I had a sudden ghastly vision of Max Greaves, slicing away at his face with the carving knife and screaming while he did it. But I suppressed the vision as much as I could and briskly opened the kitchen door.

The kitchen was empty. The old pine table was bare, and the cupboards were neatly dosed. A faucet dripped steadily into the sink. I walked across the room, biting my lip in perplexity, and turned it off. I felt ridiculously nervous and jumpy, and when I saw my own reflection in the kitchen window, I almost had a heart seizure.

Then-very faintly and distantly-I heard it. Odd, monotonous, mournful music. It made my hair prickle and my mouth go suddenly dry. I couldn't make out if it was singing or some kind of twanging string instrument. It gave me the strangest sensation that the house was alive with ghostly, pattering rodents. I lifted my head and concentrated as hard as I could, because it was very indistinct, but the harder I listened, the fainter it became, and soon it had faded altogether.

A few moments later, I heard Anna calling me from upstairs.

Chapter 3

Something had happened upstairs and I couldn't quite understand what. As I walked quickly along the long wooden corridor, I could sense an odd and subtle change in the atmosphere, like the moments before a thunderstorm or the intense breathlessness of a tropical hothouse. Anna was waiting for me at the far end, just where I had left her, but she was pressed up against the wall, her arms up against her breasts as if to protect herself from something.

"Anna?" I called.

She looked up. Then she said, "Harry!" in a thankful whisper and came running down the corridor and into my outspread arms. I held her warmly and reassuringly and stroked her hair.

After a few seconds she looked up; her face was pale and scared. She had lost her sophisticated little hat somehow and her short, curly, black hair was wild and untidy.

"Did you hear it?" I asked her. She nodded. "I was beginning to think I was going mad. I thought: What if Harry hasn't heard it? Supposing I'm going as nuts as Max Greaves?"

"It was real, all right. I heard it way down in the kitchen. Do you know where it came from?"

She shrugged. She was still trembling nervously, the same way that Marjorie had trembled when she talked about Max's terrible death in the kitchen.

"It was faint here, too, I could hardly hear it. But there was something horrible about it. It made me feel that the corridor was full of running insects, or rats, or cockroaches. I couldn't see anything, and I tried not to panic. But it just made me feel that way, as if creatures were swarming everywhere."

"Anna," I said quietly, "was there anyone up here? Did you see anyone?"

She shook her head. "Nobody. There isn't another way up here, is there?"

I looked down at her and tilted her chin up so that I could see her face. "There has to be some explanation. You know that as well as I do."

"But what? If it wasn't the jar, then who could possibly play music like that? And why would they want to?" I sniffed. "I don't know. But there's something really weird going on here. Maybe-I don't know, maybe somebody's trying to frighten us off. I went downstairs to look for Marjorie, and I could have sworn there was someone else here."

"Someone else?" she said, unsettled. "But who?" "Don't ask me. I'm not even sure it wasn't a trick of the light. It looked like a monk or something in a long robe. First, I thought I saw him in the drawing room, then in the dining room, but then he just disappeared."

Anna gently moved herself away from me. She had overcome her first terror, and my embrace was a little too intimate for mere nervousness.

"Perhaps it was Marjorie," she suggested. "Or did Marjorie see it, too?"

"I don't know. I don't know where Marjorie is. I thought she must have gone to fix the lights. I went down there and tried the switch, but it didn't work. I assumed she'd gone off to replace the fuse. That's when I saw this person or thing or whatever it was in the room."

"What kind of a robe?" asked Anna. "I haven't a clue. A robe with a hood, that's all. At least, that's what it looked like."

"A djellaba?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"An Arab robe. A djellaba. Or was it some other kind of robe?"

"It's no good asking me, Anna. As far as I'm concerned, a robe by any other name is still a robe. Anyway, I could have imagined the whole thing. You know what these spooky old houses are like. I think the best thing we can do is forget it. I just want to get that turret open and get rid of that goddamned jar."

"I think we ought to be careful, Harry. This may be a silly plot to frighten us. or something like that But what if it isn't?"

I peered down the gloomy corridor toward the sealed turret door. The long tapes that hung from the brown wax seals were stirring slightly in the evening draft. For some reason, looking at that door gave me an empty, uncomfortable feeling. It was like looking at a door that opened onto nothing but a sheer drop. I wanted to open it, but at the same time I knew that I might be irresistibly drawn by my own sense of self-destruction to step through.

I took a cigarette from my shirt pocket and lit it, "I don't know, Anna. I only suggested that someone was trying to scare us because I can't think what else it could possibly be. I know it doesn't make sense."

"It could be a djinn," Anna said simply.

"There's only one way to find out. There's a shed round the back where they keep the tools and stuff. Do you want to come with me? I'm going to find a crowbar,"

"If you think I'm going to stay in this creepy place on my own..,"

We walked silently back up the corridor, then down the stairs, through the drawing room and the kitchen, and out the back door. Outside, there was a soft warm wind blowing from the land to the sea, and creamy blue clouds were covering the stars. We crunched down the gravel drive to the tool shed and opened it up. It was very dark inside, but I knew where Max always used to keep his flashlight-hanging up on the right side of the door. Anna stayed close, looking around at the house from time to time and shivering.

"Are you cold?" I asked her.

"No," she shuddered. "Just plain old-fashioned scared."

I found the flashlight, switched it on, and rummaged through the garden tools for a crowbar or something similar. In the end, I made do with a pick. Swinging the flashlight, I started to walk with Anna back to the house. I whistled a few bars of Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go between my teeth, just to make myself feel more cheerful.

We went in through the back door, across the kitchen, and into the drawing room. We were halfway to

the hall when the lights blinked on, and there by the front door stood Marjorie and Miss Johnson in their black overcoats and mourning hats.

"Marjorie!" I said. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

For some reason, Marjorie didn't seem very interested or pleased to see me. She turned to Miss Johnson and said, "Close the door." Then she stepped rather mechanically into the drawing room. "We've been for a walk."

"Are you feeling okay?" asked Anna. "You look a little tired."

Marjorie passed a black-gloved hand lightly over her forehead. "Yes," she said. "I am tired."

Miss Johnson came into the room and stood awkwardly beside Marjorie, like an ugly daughter who is constantly aware that her mother outshines her.

"Mrs. Greaves," whispered Miss Johnson. "I'll make your milk."

"Thank you," said Marjorie. "Would you like some milk, Harry?"

I glanced at Anna and frowned. There seemed to be something wrong with Marjorie, something more than regret and exhaustion. She stood there stiff and immobile; her dark eyes seemed to be focused miles and miles away. Or perhaps it was years and years.

"I ... er ... think I'll skip the milk, thanks," I said uncomfortably. "I'm a Jack Daniels man myself." I attempted a small chuckle, but it sounded very flat in that vast mournful drawing room.

Marjorie didn't seem to have heard me. She walked across to the old settee and sat down in the same place I had imagined the hooded figure was sitting. I coughed, hefted the pick in my hand, and said, "Oh, well, it's time to start work. This won't take long."

Marjorie looked up. "Where are you going with that?" she asked coldly.

I frowned. "Er... upstairs."

"To open the turret?" asked Marjorie.

"That's right. I mean, when you said it was sealed up, you weren't kidding. All we have to do is..."

"Take it back."

I blinked. This was a Marjorie I hadn't seen before. She was composed and frigid and authoritarian. Maybe the grief and shock of Max's sudden death had gotten through to her at last.

"Marjorie," I said patiently, "If we're going to open the turret and remove the jar, we're going to have to break the door down. There's no other way. That door has iron bars, a wax seal, and God knows what else."

"We're not going to open the turret and get the jar out," said Marjorie. "The jar must be allowed to stay where it is."

"Marjorie, what are you saying? That jar has been upsetting you and Max for years, and I really believe that-"

"What you believe is not important," interrupted Marjorie. "I appreciate your interest, Harry, and yours, Miss Modena, but now I'm tired, and I would like you to go."

"Marjorie-"

Miss Johnson interrupted me. "It's been a difficult day for Mrs. Greaves, sir. I think she's right."

"I couldn't care less what you think," I said. "There's something weird about that jar and it needs to be looked at. I don't care if it's natural or supernatural, it's unhealthy. Jesus, Marjorie, it's bad enough taking all the pictures down, without giving free room and board to a goddamned pot."

Miss Johnson almost seemed to flinch. "Sir," she said, "you don't have to--"

"I don't have to listen to garbage like this, that's what I don't have to do. Marjorie, I'm annoyed. Anna and I just spent our entire afternoon looking through Max's papers and diaries, and now you're throwing us out. I know today was his funeral, and I know you've been under a strain, but you said yourself that the quicker we got this over with the better. It won't take five minutes just to--"

"I've changed my mind," said Marjorie quietly. "The jar will stay exactly where it is."

Anna shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Greaves, but it can't."

"It must. My husband willed it."

"Mrs. Greaves," said Anna. "The jar didn't even belong to your husband. The jar is the property of the government of Iran. It's quite priceless, and it's part of that country's heritage. It has to go back to its original owners."

Marjorie lifted her head and stared at Anna with her beady shrimp's eyes. "As long as I am alive," she said, "that jar will not be moved. That is my final word."

Anna sighed. "In that case, I will probably have to take action in the courts against you for repossession of the jar, apart from a whole long list of other contraband antiquities which are still in the house."

"You can do what you like," repeated Marjorie. "The jar will not be touched."

There was a long and awkward silence. Then I said, "Come on, Anna. I think we'd better leave it where it is for tonight. Do you want a ride?"

Anna nodded. "I'll get my hat."

I turned to Marjorie and tried to sound warm and conciliatory and nice. "Listen," I said. "Supposing I drop by at lunchtime tomorrow and treat myself to one of your delicious tuna salads? Then, we can talk this over some more."

Marjorie turned away. "It's late," she said calmly. "You had better take your young lady and go"

"Marjorie-

"Just go, Harry, before you stir up any more trouble."

I stayed where I was. "What's that supposed to mean?" I said sharply. "What do you mean stir up trouble?"

"Exactly that," Marjorie replied quietly. "By attempting to learn more about the jar, you have unsettled it. It knows you are here, and it wishes you to leave at once. Every moment you remain in this house, it becomes more and more uneasy. For all our sakes, it would be better if you left"

For a moment, I felt like arguing, but Anna took my arm, and I let out a long exasperated sigh and gave in. Maybe the whole thing would look better tomorrow. I took my pick out with me and propped it up against the front porch.

Marjorie and the homely Miss Johnson stood silently in the doorway watching us leave. They didn't even wave or smile.

As we turned around and started off down the drive, Anna twisted around in her seat to take a last look at Winter Sails.

"Take a good long look while you're at it," I said bitterly. "I expect she'll have it burned down by tomorrow. I haven't been so goddamned furious in years."

Anna didn't seem to be listening. "Does she have two companions?" she asked urgently.

"What?"

"Your godmother-does she have two companions? Miss Johnson and someone else?"

I shrugged. "Not that I know of."

"Well, who's that then? Look in your mirror. "

I quickly checked my rear-view mirror. I couldn't look for very long, because the driveway was dark and winding, but I saw the silhouettes of Marjorie and Miss Johnson and-

I jammed on the brakes. The Cougar slithered and bucked on the weedy gravel, I stared back at the house, then looked at Anna with my mouth open. "I don't know," I said hoarsely. "I only caught a glimpse. It looks like that person in the robe."

"Do you think we ought to go back?" asked Anna nervously. "I would never forgive myself if anything happened to those two."

I thought for a while drumming my finger on the steering wheel. The front door of Winter Sails was closed now, and there were no lights showing. In the distance, the surf gleamed fluorescent white through the darkness.

"Oh, what the hell," I said at last. "I've had enough of this for one day. They've probably got a guest there they don't want me to meet. I don't know why, but I'm too hungry to go back and find out. Let's find ourselves some dinner and decide what to do on a full belly."

I released the brakes, and we drove off into the murky night. I felt worried and unsettled about Marjorie, but there are times when godsonly devotion can be overcome by irritation, fatigue, and a desire to entertain comely girls.

Over steak and salad in the candlelit restaurant of the Cape Cod Motel, Anna and I talked some more about djinns and Arabian magic and Marjorie's mysterious behavior. We had stopped to pick up Anna's suitcase at Hyannis Airport, and she had changed into something more becoming than her funeral suit. She wore a simple white evening dress, low-cut and silky, which showed off her sun-tanned shoulders and an inviting amount of cleavage. In the restaurant, there was Californian burgundy, plenty of hot rolls, piped music, laughter, plush decor, and reality. After the events of the day, reality was something that both Anna and I sorely needed.

"Look at it this way," I said through a mouthful of steak. "Just because Max Greaves had the jar of djinns in the house, that doesn't mean that the jar was responsible for his behavior. If you ask me, it was the other way around. Max went off his head and made everybody think it was the jar that was doing it"

Anna shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "I'm trying to keep an open mind. You have to admit that he went to an awful lot of trouble to seal up the jar in the authentic ancient way."

"Of course he did. Eccentrics always do. They have a passion for detail. Half the time, he probably thought he was a Persian magician from the fifth century B.C."

"I'd like to know more about the faces," said Anna.

"What faces?"

"The portraits, the pipe, and all those magazines with the pictures cut out. His own face, if it comes to that. There must have been a reason for it."

"We could always ask Dr. Jarvis."

"Is he the family doctor?"

I nodded. "He's been looking after Max and Marjorie for a coon's age. I think if I talk to him in just the right way, he might tell me what happened. I had measles once when I was staying at Winter Sails, and I kind of made friends with him. He's very proper, but if I tell him I'm worried about Marjorie..."

Anna grated some black pepper over her steak. "It's worth a try. If you do that, I'll have a talk with Professor Qualt out at New Bedford."

"Qualt? Who's he?"

"You must have heard of Gordon Qualt. He's America's foremost expert in ancient folklore and Middle Eastern culture."

"Why the hell should I have heard of him?"

Anna smiled. "Don't get so offended. He was in the newspapers not long ago when they turned up that marble-smuggling racket out of Iraq. He's very keen on keeping treasures in the environment where they were originally created."

I stabbed a piece of pickle. "I agree with him. I hate to see people losing their marbles."

"You're impossible," laughed Anna. "I'm glad I found out what you were like before I asked you to read my fortune. I might have believed it."

"Were you going to ask me to read your fortune?"

She made big foxy eyes at me. They sparkled in the soft candlelight, and somehow I had the feeling that she was thinking of making a play for me. Don't ask me how, it was just one of those remarkable intuitions that we clairvoyants are prone to.

"Well," I said, "you mustn't let my naturally suspicious nature put you off. I do tell a very mean fortune."

"Will you read mine?"

"Sure, what do you want? Palm reading, Tarot, tea leaves, or crystal ball? I can even read the bumps on your head."

She laughed. "What are you best at?"

"After I've read your fortune, I'll show you."

We finished our steaks and ordered Irish coffee. The piped music was playing a treacly version of "Samba Pa Ti," and at the next table, a man with a loud tie and a large mustache was laughing in great uncontrolled shouts. A middle-aged woman wobbled past us in purple nylon ski pants, silver shoes, and a green-rinsed, gray, beehive hairdo. Her husband, in yellow and red plaid, looked like a character out of the Sunday funnies.

"What kind of a guy is Qualt?" I asked Anna. "Do you know him personally? I mean, do you think he'll help us?"

"He's very sensitive and very understanding. I used to have a crush on him at the university. I guess Qualt is one reason why I'm doing the job I'm doing. I was always interested in antiques, but he really turned me on to this whole thing of restoring Middle Eastern antiquities to their rightful owners."

I lit a cigarette. "What's he working on now? Giving Manhattan back to the Indians?"

"Manhattan was bought. Most of the treasures of the Middle East were stolen."

I coughed. "I don't see that it makes any difference where antiquities are. As long as people can see them, what does it matter?"

She sipped her coffee. "It's a question of national heritage. How would you feel if some Iranian took the Statue of Liberty and set it up at the head of the Persian Gulf?"

"Very offended. I've lived in the city most of my life, and I haven't had the chance to visit it yet. If I can never find the time to get out to Liberty Island, how the hell am I going to find the time to get out to the Persian Gulf?"

"Well," said Anna, "you get the general picture of what Professor Qualt is trying to do. He believes that it's important for countries to be aware of their heritage and to have their treasures within their own boundaries. He says it gives a nation historic continuity."

I sniffed. "Right now I could do with some Irish coffee continuity. Are you ready for another?"

"I'll be tipsy."

"Of course you will. Otherwise, what's the point of drinking them?"

When dinner was over, we relaxed in the motel's lounge with a quite postprandial drink. There was some spark of attraction between us, but both of us were completely aware that we weren't going to share a bed that night. There were too many ghosts to think about, and apart from that, we were the kind of people who needed to get to know each other a little better. We were circling around each other's personalities like two curious cats, but we weren't quite ready to start rubbing noses. I definitely had the feeling that Anna was the kind of girl who, once aroused and interested, would need a great deal of careful and sensitive handling. I wasn't sure that I was prepared to commit myself to that kind of relationship just at that moment. I had only recently finished a long and harrowing entanglement with Alison, and I was enjoying the slightly morbid peace and solitude that only final separation can bring.

"Are you going to tell my fortune now?" asked Anita.

"Certainly. Fortunes told, dreams delved, that's what I'm here for. Let's start with the wine test."

"The wine test?"

"It's an old Israeli method of telling fortunes. Watch. I'll take this saucer and pour a little water into it. Then I want you to dip your fingers in your glass of wine and let the drops fall from the tips of your fingers into the water. See-they form a cloudy shape. A kind of three-dimensional Rorschach blot. Now, what does that remind you off?"

Anna bent down and peered at the swirling fog of red wine in the saucer. It spread across the surface in quite a symmetrical pattern, then it seemed to hover motionless for a moment before mingling irretrievably with the water.

"Do you know," she said, "I could have sworn-"

"What?"

"Well, it seems ridiculous, but it looked like a jar."

I reached for another cigarette. "I think you've got jars on the brain. Let's forget the wine, and I'll give you the Tarot cards. They're ancient Egyptian, so if there are any antique Middle Eastern pots in your life, they should show up in these."

I took my well-thumbed Tarot cards out of my coat pocket, shuffled them, and began to work out Anna's future prospects. There was nothing spectacular there. A marriage in the middle to distant future. No sign of great wealth or fame. A bereavement. Some arguments over law or contracts. However, when I was about to turn over the last card-the card that would tell Anna her immediate fortune-I hesitated.

"What's the matter?"

I frowned. "Er ... I think I've done it wrong."

"What's wrong about it?"

"I... er... didn't shuffle them enough."

Anna looked at me seriously. "Harry, what's the matter? Why have you stopped?"

Without even turning up the next card, I said, "I believe I know what the next card is going to be. I'm sure of it, in fact."

She smiled uneasily. "But don't you always know? You are a clairvoyant, aren't you?"

I lowered my eyes. "Sort of. I mean, I have a modest gift."

"Then-"

"Then nothing. I've never known before what a card's going to be. I've guessed, but I've never known."

"Don't be so worried about it. You said yourself that telling fortunes was like servicing cars. The more you do, the better you get. Perhaps all your practice is paying off. You're a full-fledged mechanic."

I laid the Tarot pack on the low glass-topped table without revealing the top card,

"That top card," I said, "is the Star. It shows a woman emptying jars into a stream. Its meaning is usually

interpreted as loss or deprivation. In some ways, the loss is often more tragic than any of the losses that the Death card predicts. On the Death card, Death is riding into town on his black charger, and he's being greeted as an inevitable part of life. But the Star shows life forces being spilled away for no reason at all."

"Out of jars?" whispered Anna.

"That's right. Out of jars."

For a little while, Anna sat there with her drink in her hand staring at the Tarot deck and saying nothing. Then, hesitantly, she reached forward and picked up the top card. She turned it around and looked at it.

"You see," I said. "The Star."

Anna shook her head. "You're wrong. It's not the Star at all."

I couldn't understand it. The card had given me such powerful and magnetic sensations that I could hardly believe she was telling me the truth.

"Let me see that," I said, taking the card from her.

It wasn't the Star; it was worse. It was the Ten of Swords. The picture on the card depicts a man lying dead on a deserted seashore, under a darkening sky, with ten long swords piercing his body. His head is turned away, although it is obvious that one of the swords is stuck right into his face.

On an impulse, I picked up the next card in the pack and turned it over. It was the Star. I laid the two cards side by side on the table and sat looking at them for a long time. For some reason I couldn't understand, it appeared that I was being given a warning by the Tarot. It had happened to me before, and I had felt just as creepy and just as uncertain about it then. Now, with these two cards reinforcing each other's mystical message of fate, loss, and injury, I was being informed by whatever influences surround the occult that I was treading dangerous ground-and that further steps along the path I was pursuing might result in tragedy.

"Do you believe it?" asked Anna.

I shrugged. "I don't know what to think. These cards are very strange and temperamental; it doesn't pay to mess around with them unless you know what you're doing. In effect, they're telling me to drop this jar business."

"But you're not going to leave your godmother alone with the jar, are you? I mean, you can't"

I shuffled my cards and put them away. "Anna, she may be my godmother, but I don't know her that well. Not well enough to start taking full responsibility for everything she does. Today was the first time I've seen her in three years. You couldn't call us bosom pals."

"But what about that man in the robe?"

I raised my arm to call the waiter. All of a sudden, I felt I needed another drink.

"Anna," I told her, "we don't even know it was a man. It could have been a friend of Marjorie's in a bathrobe. Maybe he or she just came to the door to watch us go. We were all tired. It could have been a mistake. But if it makes you feel any better, we can go around there tomorrow and check up."

The waiter arrived—a lugubrious soul with a maroon jacket and a smile like a hotel coat hanger. I ordered a bourbon and branch water; Anna asked for a Coke.

"I think you're as frightened as I am," said Anna provocatively, as we waited for our drinks.

I didn't say anything at all. I simply smiled the mysterious Erskine smile, and let her think what she liked. To tell you the truth, I didn't know what to think. In some respects, I was terrified. I knew there was something very wrong with that jar, and I didn't relish the prospect of trying to get it out of the turret. But on the other hand, the legends and warnings seemed so coincidental and obscure that it was hard to be very convinced. At the moment my number one working theory was that Max Greaves had somehow become mentally deranged and had invested the jar with all kinds of strange qualities of his own maniac

invention. I didn't know what to believe about the music, but it was quite possible that there were freak chimneys or cracks in the fabric of an old house like that, and that on certain occasions the wind happened to build up a warbling vibration. Perhaps if we spoke to Dr. Jarvis, then had a word with this Professor Qualt character, we might get closer to the truth. As my dear departed mother used to say, "There is no such thing as a mystery. Someone, somewhere, always knows the answer."

I called at Dr. Jarvis's house at half-past nine the next morning. It promised to be another fine day, although it was breezier, and thick white clouds were tumbling out of the west. Anna stayed in the car while I walked up Dr. Jarvis's neat brick path, under the shade of an old elm, and rang his doorbell.

Dr. Jarvis's house was tucked away in the wealthier part of Hyannis, surrounded by elegant yards, leafy walks, and traffic-free roads. It was a large white colonial home of character and charm, and Dr. Jarvis, kindly but formal, lived up to its grandeur and style.

His maid, a short black girl in a crisp white apron, opened the door. "Sir?"

"I'd like to speak to Dr. Jarvis. Is he at home?"

"He's having his breakfast at the moment."

"Could you tell him it's about Max Greaves. Tell him I know how Max Greaves died."

The maid looked perplexed. "Sir?"

"That's all I have to say. Tell Dr. Jarvis I know how Max Greaves died."

The maid frowned, then walked off along the corridor to what was obviously the breakfast room. I heard quiet conversation, the movement of a chair, and then Dr. Jarvis appeared, dabbing his mouth with a linen napkin. He was a tall gray-haired man with rimless spectacles, a nose as sharp as a shark's fin, and a kindly stoop. He was immaculately dressed in a gray suit, with a gold watch chain across his matching vest.

"Good morning," he said. "I'm afraid you've been confusing Lucinda. She does get confused."

"I didn't mean to," I told him. "My name is Harry Erskine. I'm Max's godson."

"Oh, yes. I believe I saw you yesterday at his funeral. I hope you'll accept my condolences."

"Thank you. I didn't mean to interrupt your breakfast, Dr. Jarvis, but Marjorie told me what happened when Max died, and I'm kind of worried about the whole situation."

"Worried? What do you mean?"

I scratched my head. "I don't know exactly. It's pretty hard to explain. But the way I see it, something was bothering Max Greaves, and it seems to me that Marjorie might be affected as well."

Dr. Jarvis looked serious. "Come inside," he said. "You'd better have some coffee while I finish my breakfast."

I stepped inside the elegant house, and Dr. Jarvis showed me to the breakfast room. It was decorated in Adam green and white, and hung with oil paintings of seascapes and rural scenes. From the polished oval table, we had a view of the wide rambling garden and the distant blue line of the ocean.

The maid came in with a fresh cup and poured me some coffee, and Dr. Jarvis, with surgical precision, finished cutting and buttering his English muffins.

"You say Marjorie might be affected as well?" asked Dr. Jarvis. "Do you know how?"

I put my cup down. "It's difficult to say at the moment. I don't know how well you knew Max or Marjorie, but I imagine you were pretty close. I mean, I guess you were friends."

Dr. Jarvis nodded. "Indeed we were. My wife and I used to visit Winter Sails quite frequently for dinner, up until the time that Max became unwell."

"Unwell? I don't understand. Marjorie said there was nothing physically wrong with him."

"There wasn't," said Dr. Jarvis, "apart from. high blood pressure and some minor prostate trouble. When I say 'unwell,' I mean he became nervous and anxious and allowed his affairs to go downhill."

"Did you ever know why?" I asked. "Did Max ever confide in you?"

Dr. Jarvis munched some muffin. "Max was never a forthright man at the best of times, as you probably know yourself. All I know is that he felt a compulsion CD occupy his days and his nights with a piece of antique Arabian pottery that he had brought back from the Middle East"

"The jar," I said. "The jar with the horses and the flowers."

Dr. Jarvis nodded. "That's correct." He rang a small silver bell for more coffee.

"Did Max ever tell you why?"

"Why what?"

"Why he spent his days and nights with the jar? I mean, what was he doing with the jar? It's locked in the turret at Winter Sails now. More than locked-it's sealed in, with two iron bars and sealing wax and God knows what else."

"I know that," said Dr. Jarvis.

"And you don't think that's strange?"

Dr. Jarvis looked at me closely. "Of course it's strange. In his own way, Max Greaves was a very strange man. But he knew what he was doing. You have to understand that he was not an amateur."

"An amateur what? I don't understand."

"An amateur anything," said Dr. Jarvis carefully. "He was a businessman, a diplomat, a collector of rare antiquities, a scholar, and a gentleman. He pursued none of his interests in an amateurish way. As I say, he knew what he was doing."

I sighed. "All the same, he ended up killing himself?"

Dr. Jarvis shrugged. "Did he?"

"Well, you know that as well as I do," I said. "Marjorie found him in the kitchen with his face all cut up."

Dr. Jarvis laid down his napkin and stared at me solemnly. "I don't know what your profession is, Mr. Erskine," he said in a grave voice, "but in my profession I learn not to leap to hasty conclusions."

"So you're saying it wasn't suicide?"

"It was suicide of a particular kind."

I reached for a cigarette. "What particular kind? How many kinds of suicide are there?"

Dr. Jarvis took a gold lighter from his vest pocket, reached over, and lit my cigarette. "There are many different kinds of suicide," he said steadily. "Almost as many kinds as there are cases. Each person who decides to take his or her own life does so for a reason which, at the time of death, seems overwhelmingly

important Suicide is the result of a mental crisis, and all mental crises vary. Each person is subject to different strains and different pressures."

"I think you can spare me the grade-school psychology," I said. "I want to know what kind of suicide Max Greaves committed."

Dr. Jarvis removed his eyeglasses. He had those pale watery eyes that remind me of clams on the half-shell, with a touch of Tabasco sauce in the corner.

"Max Greaves's suicide was of the self-sacrificing kind," said Dr. Jarvis quietly. "He didn't take his own life. He gave it."

I stood up and walked across to the window. Outside, it was sunny and warm and normal. In here, the chill and tension that seemed to accompany everything I said about the jar was all too obvious. I stayed silent for a while, smoking my cigarette, then I said, "Dr. Jarvis, if Max gave his life, can you tell me what for and why?"

Dr. Jarvis coughed. "Mr. Erskine, before I answer that question, I have one of my own. What is it that you think threatens Mrs. Greaves, and what has it to do with Max's death?"

I leaned against the window and watched the distant flecks of foam on the dark blue sea. "I don't know," I said softly. "There is something strange about that jar, and I don't know what it is. I believe that Max invested the jar with all kinds of peculiar properties it didn't really have. I think he convinced himself that these things really happened-that the jar sang and performed all kinds of other tricks. I'd say that he brought all his anguish and punishment on himself. What worries me is that Marjorie now seems to feel the same way about the jar, and if she feels the same way, well-maybe she'll wind up the same way."

Dr. Jarvis grimaced. He looked tired and old, and I could hardly believe he was the same doctor who had come to visit me all those years ago, and sat on the end of my bed, and showed me how to make airplanes out of wooden tongue spatulas.

"Mr. Erskine," he said, "I will tell you all I know. It's supposed to be unethical, but I have been as confused and baffled by Max's death as you have, and perhaps it will help if a fresh mind is brought to bear on it."

I stayed by the window, smoking and looking out over the garden. "Go on," I said, "I'm listening."

"I said that Max was not an amateur-not at anything. Whatever he did, he always believed he should do it as well as, or perhaps even better than, a professional. He didn't spare himself anything, and if he couldn't be the best at what he did, then he simply gave up and would never try that particular pursuit again. Max Greaves had to be number one."

"That's a fair description," I said quietly.

"Well," said Dr. Jarvis, "Max was one of the most knowledgeable collectors of mystic Middle Eastern antiquities in the world. I don't know whether you know this, but most of his possessions were connected with magic and the occult. The jar was his greatest triumph. He bought it in Persia in the 1950s, shipped it back to the United States, and then spent years trying to discover what it was and how it should be looked after. He believed it was the original jar of Ali Babah, who was supposed to be a court wizard in some ancient time. He often talked to me about it, and he used to say that he believed there was a real genie in it, like the genie of the lamp. He said the top of the jar was sealed to keep the genie inside, and if you tried to break it open, you would die in a manner too horrible to contemplate. The genie was very powerful and very malevolent. The only way to control it would be to find some of the old magic books and learn how to keep your genie at heel."

I sat down and leaned back. "Did you believe any of this? Or did you think that his mind was wandering?"

Dr. Jarvis smiled. "I didn't know what to believe. Max was always so convincing when he talked about the genie. He used to call it Jar of the Djinn. I believe djinn is another Arab word for genie."

"That's right." I nodded knowledgeably, although I had only found that out for myself the previous day. "Djinn, genie, jinni, they're all the same thing."

"I have wondered about Max more and more," said Dr. Jarvis. "When I first saw his body, I thought he must have been murdered. But there was no possible way that anyone could have gotten in or out of the kitchen where he killed himself. It was also plain by the hesitation marks that he was committing suicide. The question was-as you have asked yourself-why?"

"Was he mad?" I asked bluntly. "Is that it? Did he go off his head?"

"We can't rule that out," said Dr. Jarvis. "But as far as I'm concerned, there are only two possibilities."

"What are they?"

Dr. Jarvis raised a thumb and a finger. "One, that he was mentally deranged, and he believed that the Jar of the Djinn had evil powers which were overwhelming him. Or two, that the Jar of the Djinn really was getting at him, and he killed himself to prevent it from taking over his mind and his body."

I poured myself some more coffee. "Is there any evidence either way?"

Dr. Jarvis shook his head. "Not very much. With Mrs. Greaves's permission, I undertook an autopsy. There was no brain damage, no serious tumor or disease which might have contributed toward hallucinatory or mentally deranged behavior."

"That doesn't mean he wasn't deranged."

"Oh, no, of course not," said Dr. Jarvis. "He may well have suffered quite serious mental derangement without it being detectable by ordinary physical examination. But my autopsy did show that it was less likely, particularly since everything else he did, apart from his studies of the jar, was perfectly natural and normal, and showed no signs of imbalance or inconsistency."

I crushed out my cigarette. "And what about the evidence against mental derangement? Is there any evidence in favor of the jar being-well, whatever it is?"

"There is very little," said Dr. Jarvis. "Most of it is legend and hearsay; at least that's what I gathered from the occasional clues Max used to give me. He always used to say it was impossible to open the jar, but if you could, you would see nothing. The djinn, he said, had no physical manifestations when it was trapped inside the jar. For that reason, every powerful djinn tried to persuade outsiders to find a face for it."

I could feel a chill, a prickly sensation in my hands. "A face?" I said in a whisper.

"That's right. The djinn could not leave the jar until it had found a face for itself. Without a face, it was trapped and powerless to walk abroad. Or fly, or swim, or whatever it is that djinns do."

"Dr. Jams, is it possible that Max Greaves tried to cut off his face to prevent the djinn from getting it?"

Dr. Jarvis looked away. "That was what I meant by a suicide of self-sacrifice," he said. "Whether the djinn exists or not, Max believed that he was doing all of us a favor by denying the djinn the one thing that it needed to get out of its prison. His own face."

I didn't know what to say. I sat slumped in my seat, while Dr. Jarvis watched me with calm, con-censed, benevolent eyes, and the half-hunter watch in his vest chattered away like a busy old woman.

I opened the car door and climbed in. Anna was dearly annoyed. "You took your time, didn't you? I thought you said you were only going to talk to him for a couple of minutes,"

I started the engine, swung the car around, and headed out toward the beach road. I reached into my pocket for a cigarette.

"You seem to have lost the power of speech, as well as all sense of time," she said sharply.

I lit my cigarette with my battered Zippo. "I always get like this when I'm afraid that a woman has proved me wrong. It's called male chauvinist dog-in-the-mangerism."

"You smoke too much," she said, opening the car window. "Do you know that it's a statistical fact that more people are killed by lung cancer than by evil spirits?"

"I'm not sure I'd prefer the lung cancer," I said, taking a wide corner with howling tires.

"What did he say?" she asked. "Did he tell you how Max Greaves died?"

I kept my eyes on the road. "Dr. Jarvis doesn't know any more than we do. He's just guessing, like us. But he thinks that Max cut off his face for a very specific reason. Whether there was anything magical inside that jar or not, Max was trying to stop it from coming to life.

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I really, and neither does Dr. Jarvis. Max told Dr. Jarvis the jar contained a djinn, but the djinn couldn't escape from the jar without a face. The djinn was supposed to be formless, if you see what I mean-just a puff of smoke in a bottle. It couldn't have any existence outside the jar without borrowing physical features from something or someone else. That's why Max removed all his portrait collection and broke his pipe and burned every picture and food label that showed a face."

Anna frowned. "That doesn't make sense. If the djinn could have taken Max's face, why didn't it take it right away? Why didn't it take Marjorie's face-or Miss Johnson's?"

I swerved to avoid a boy on a bicycle with a fishing pole. "The thought of an ancient evil spirit with Miss Johnson's face on it is too frightening to contemplate," I said. "If you were a djinn, would you want to go around looking like her?"

"Harry, you're not being serious."

I flung my half-smoked butt out of the window. "Well, what the hell am I supposed to do? You know I don't want to believe any of this, and at the same time, you know damned well that I do"

She parted her gorgeous glossy lips. "You do believe?" she said huskily. "You mean you really think that-"

"It's like Sherlock Holmes, isn't it? Eliminate the impossible, and whatever's left, however improbable, is the truth. Something like that. I think the whole idea of this djinn is unlikely and improbable, but every other explanation for what's going on at Winter Sails is goddamned ridiculous."

"But what about Marjorie's face, and Miss Johnson's?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's more difficult for djinns to take faces from real people than it is from pictures or photographs. Maybe this Professor Qualt will have some ideas."

"Is that where you want to go now?" asked Anna.

I shook my head. "First of all, I want to visit Marjorie. I just want to see if she feels the same way now that she did last night."

"Okay," said Anna. "I'll second that"

It took us another ten minutes to reach Winter Sails. We drove slowly up the graveled drive, past the leaning trees and the overgrown lawns, and pulled up in front of the house. It looked empty and deserted. The pick was leaning on the porch where I had left it last night, and the drapes in the upstairs rooms were still drawn.

We climbed out of the car and looked around. The soft westerly wind made the weathervane swing and squeak. There was a fresh smell of salt in the air. I went up to the peeling blue front door and pulled the bell. Inside the house, I heard the chimes.

"It looks as though there's nobody home," said Anna after a while;

"Wait a minute or two," I told her. "Maybe they slept late."

I rang the doorbell again, and we waited patiently for someone to answer. After two or three minutes, we decided that Marjorie and Miss Johnson must have gone out marketing, or whatever it is that widows and their homely companions do on August mornings.

"You don't think that anything's happened, do you?" asked Anna.

"What do you mean?"

"Well-what about that figure we saw last night? The one in the robe?"

"Don't ask me. Why don't you check the garage to see if the car's still there. I'll take a look round the side."

Anna crunched across the gravel to the dilapidated garage, while I walked around to the side of the house and up three small brick steps to the big lawn. From the center of the lawn I could see the turret, with its conical Gothic roof and dark forbidding windows. I was wondering if it was possible to take a ladder and climb up there, so that we could see what we had in store for us before we actually knocked down the turret door.

Out on the foaming blue ocean, a small flotilla of yachts was tacking into the breeze, and seagulls circled the deserted beach. The long grass on the lawn whipped against my legs as I walked toward the overgrown sundial. I shaded my eyes so I could get a better view of the turret

There was very little to see. The windows were impenetrable from this distance, and there was nothing unusual about its outward appearance. I walked up to the stone pedestal of the sundial and tried to perch on the edge of it to give myself a better vantage point, but it didn't make any difference. The turret remained dark, silent and secretive.

I looked down at the face of the sundial to check it against my watch. I used to love that sundial when I was a kid. For me, there's always been something mysterious about the way the sun moves across the sky and the shadow deflects to time its course. When I see a sundial, it always reminds me of hot, long, childhood summers, when the days seemed to pass so slowly, and being a grownup was something you never even thought about

But today, this sundial didn't remind me of anything like that. Instead of the usual Roman figures on the dial and the maker's name on the brass plate, there was a completely different arrangement of pictures and engraved numerals. I examined it closely. All around the outside were circles containing Arabic lettering, and in the center of the circle were elaborate drawings of extraordinary insects and animals. The pointer was different, too. It had a series of holes and perforations that ran down it like a serpent.

I heard footsteps coming across the lawn, and I said, "Anna, come and take a look at this."

I turned around, and it was Marjorie. It must have been some trick of perspective, because at first she seemed very small, as if I was looking at her through the wrong end of a telescope, but as she came nearer, she grew larger and larger, quite out of proportion to the distance she was walking. By the time she arrived at the sundial, she looked perfectly ordinary, but the sensation of watching her grow like that gave me a strange and unsettled feeling.

"Marjorie," I said. Not cheerfully, because her face was too drawn and strained, but with good godsonly respect.

She looked at me without saying a word. She was wearing an ankle-length black dress that furred and unfurled in the ocean breeze, and her hair was twisted into a steely-gray bun. She was wearing a small

pair of yellow-tinted pince-nez and dangling earrings that tinkled when she walked.

"Are you all right, Marjorie?" I asked. "You don't seem-quite yourself."

Marjorie didn't seem to be listening. "Have you touched the dial?" she said.

I looked down at the sundial. "No, of course not. I mean, I was just taking a look at it. It's different." Somehow I didn't think it would be a good idea to say I had laid my hands on it. There was something oddly threatening in the tone of her voice.

"Yes," she said baldly. "It's different."

I waited to see if she'd say anything else, but she didn't. She stood there, quiet and unmoving, and if that wasn't a straightforward invitation to leave, I've never seen one.

"Marjorie," I said earnestly. "There's something wrong here, and I want to help you. I just want you to tell me what's wrong."

"Wrong?" she said quietly. "No, there's nothing wrong. You mustn't fret, Harry, mustn't fret. Everything's going the way it should. We're all happy."

I reached for my cigarettes. Tense situations always make me smoke too heavily. I cupped my hands against the breeze and lit up. I almost singed my eyebrows with my Zippo.

"Marjorie, I thought I saw someone else here last night. Apart from Miss Johnson. A man or a woman in a kind of robe."

Marjorie looked back at the house. On the turret roof, the weathervane was squeaking and swinging, a rusty scimitar pointing west.

"Did you, Harry?" she said vaguely. "That's nice."

"Nice? Marjorie, I don't understand this at all. There's some mysterious person wandering around your house in a robe and all you can say is 'that's nice'? Who is he, Marjorie? What's going on here?"

Marjorie began to walk away, back toward Winter Sails. She walked so fast I had trouble keeping up with her.

"Marjorie, I can't help you unless I know what's going on."

"We're all happy, Harry," she repeated in a flat, expressionless tone. "We're all as happy as larks, Harry. Happy as larks."

"Marjorie - please!" But she kept on walking, right down to the brick steps by the gravel driveway. I reached out to catch her sleeve, but it was impossible to grasp. It didn't seem to have any substance at all. The next thing I knew, Marjorie had fled across the drive and disappeared inside the house. It all happened so fast I didn't really understand what was going on.

I went up to the front door and rang the bell again. Then I hammered on it with my fist. "Marjorie! Marjorie! I want to talk to you, Marjorie!" I shouted, but there was no reply.

Just then, Anna came around the other side of the house from the direction of the garage.

"The car's still there," she called. "I guess they must have overslept. Were you calling me?"

I punched my fist into my hand. "No, dammit, I was calling Marjorie. I was out on the side lawn and she came out. The next thing I knew, she scuttled back into the house. Now she won't answer the door."

"Are you sure?" said Anna, frowning. "That seems very strange."

"Sure?" I said angrily. "Of course I'm sure. I've known the woman for thirty years. Who else could it be?"

We stepped back from the house and tried to see if we could see anyone looking from the upstairs windows. The drapes were still drawn, and there was no sign of life.

"Perhaps we ought to break in," said Anna. "Maybe they're sick or in trouble."

I sniffed. "Maybe they're just being bolshevik."

Anna held my arm. "Harry," she said, "you know that there's something going on. I think you ought to make the effort to find out. I mean, supposing the djinn's escaped or supposing it's done the same thing to her as it did to Max?"

I walked over to the brick steps and sat down. Anna stood beside me, and for a few moments we thought our thoughts in silence.

"I don't know," I said, after a while. "I don't know where my responsibilities begin and I don't know where they end. She said they were as happy as larks. They were all as happy as larks."

"All?" said Anna. "Marjorie and Miss Johnson and who else?"

"Oh, don't ask me. I'm beginning to think we're making a mystical mountain out of a mundane molehill."

Anna pulled a face. "You're very alliterative today."

"Well, it's better than chasing Persian genies. Come on. I think we ought to forget this whole mess and find ourselves some lunch. I could do with a cold bottle of Bud and a hot dog."

Anna shook her head. "It's no use avoiding the issue, Harry. I have to find that jar because it's my job, and you have to find it because Marjorie's your widowed godmother. We can't shirk it."

I shrugged. "It seems to me that you have a far more compelling reason for finding it than I do," I told her. "Why don't you just grab the pick, knock the door down, and explain it to Marjorie yourself."

Anna looked serious. "I wish I had the nerve," she said. "How about the turret? Do you think we could get a ladder up there?"

"I guess so," I said reluctantly. "But you do realize that, technically, we're trespassing?"

Anna unbuttoned the cuffs of her gray silk blouse. "I'm only trespassing when I'm caught," she said. "Where do they keep the ladders?"

I pointed to the tool shed. "I suppose I can't persuade you otherwise?"

"No way. It's about time we had a good look at this jar in the light of day."

I stood up. "Being a feeble female, I suppose you'll want some help. Okay, let's go get a ladder and see what this goddamned jar is really doing. Maybe it's changed as much as the sundial."

Anna raised an eyebrow. "What sundial?"

I inclined my head toward the lawn. "That one there. The dial's been altered into some Arabic thing."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. Stop asking me if I'm sure all the goddamned time. I'm the surest man I ever met. But don't take my word for it, go and look for yourself."

"I will," she said, and she rushed off toward the sundial so urgently that I had to follow and find out what all this was about.

"There," I said, pointing to the pictures and the Arabic writing. "When I was a kid, this was an ordinary sundial."

Anna was examining the dial with the horrified intentness of a middle-class mother searching her daughter's hair for lice. Her lips moved a little as she translated some of the words for herself, and every now and then she said, "My God."

I stood there patiently until she had finished. Then, when she looked up, I said, "What is it? Is this another creepy Persian manifestation?"

Anna nodded. "I suppose you could call it that.

I've read about these, and I've seen drawings of them, but this is the first real one I've ever actually seen. It's called a night-clock."

"You mean it's a sundial that tells the time at night? I knew these Arabs were pretty smart, but I didn't know they were that smart."

She shook her head. "It's not a clock in that sense. It's a spiritual device. You've heard of stars and planets coming into conjunction with each other in astrology?"

I pulled a humorless grin. "Madam, you're talking to an expert."

"Well," she said, without returning my smile, "it was always rumored that some of the ancient Arabs found ways of drawing the influences of the planets to one focal point on the earth, rather like focusing of

rays of the sun through a magnifying glass. They could adjust their night-clocks to line up with different galaxies and star formations, and concentrate whatever kind of spiritual power they wanted in an area no larger than my thumbnail."

I flicked the tip of the night-clock's pointer. "So this is an original genuine spiritual device?" I asked. "Maybe it's just here for decoration. Something that Max picked up on his travels."

Anna looked serious. "You don't just 'pick up' a night-clock, Harry. They're still forbidden in Iran, although no government official will tell you that The last known night-clock was impounded in Bagdad twenty-five years ago and destroyed."

I frowned. "Are you kidding? One of these? But what the hell can you do with it?"

"You can do a great deal with it," said Anna. "You can use it to strike down your enemies. You can use it to give unnatural power to your friends. It needs experience and tremendous talent to operate properly. I guess the nearest nonspiritual activity to working a night-clock is flying an airliner in a hurricane. You're dealing with tremendous, tempestuous forces, and all the time you're trying to focus them with pinpoint accuracy."

"Sounds fun," I said. "The only question is - what's it doing here?"

Anna pushed her curly hair out of her eyes. "That's probably not too hard to find out," she said. "Kneel down beside it and look through the side of the pointer until all the perforations line up. That's what my old books said you had to do, anyway."

"All right," I said. "I'm game."

I knelt down beside the sundial, closed one eye, and squinted at the perforations on the side of the pointer. The curious thing about these holes was that, even though they were pierced in the same flat two-dimensional pointer, they seemed to close up together when you looked at them from certain angles. I shifted around the sundial until they all appeared to converge into one small hole.

"What can you see?" asked Anna.

"A hole, what do you think?"

"Yes - but look through the hole."

I squinted again and focused my gaze through the extraordinary hole in the pointer. I saw nothing but white light at first, until I realized I was looking at the reflection of clouds on window-glass. I moved my head to the side and saw just what it was. The night-clock was set up to focus on the Gothic turret of Winter Sails.

"The turret?" said Anna.

"Yes," I told her.

"I thought so," she said. "I think we ought to find Professor Qualt right away and ask him what we can do."

I shrugged. "Okay, if you want to. But if this night-clock's so dangerous, why can't we just smash it up ourselves?"

"No." said Anna. "It might have influence on innocent people as well as evil spirits. A night-clock ties people to it like babies on umbilical cords. If you've been affected by a night-clock, then you're totally dependent on it for your spiritual survival."

"Well, as long as you know what you're talking about, we'll leave it," I said. "My personal feeling is that we ought to break it up."

As I took a last squint through the hole, I thought I saw a slight flicker of movement. I looked again, and I could have sworn that, through the hole, I saw a pale shape, half-obsured behind reflected light on the turret window.

"Anna -" I started to speak, but the shape disappeared, and there was nothing but the silent house and that repetitive weathervane, squeaking like a pain that wouldn't go away.

It took us all afternoon to find Professor Qualt. We called at his apartment in a rambling old house just outside of New Bedford, but his landlady said that he had left around 7:30 in the morning, with a lunchbox. He usually went to the beach, she said, and wrote up his notes. Unfortunately, she didn't know which beach, or where it was. Anna and I looked at each other in resigned patience, climbed back in the car, and went to find him.

After seven beaches, we saw a brightly colored umbrella amongst the grassy dunes and went to investigate. It was Professor Qualt, asleep. He was a middle-aged man with the muscular physique and the dense black body hair of an educated gorilla, He was lying flat out under the umbrella with a half-empty can of beer in one hand; the radio was playing Mozart string quartets. He was wearing reflecting mirror sunglasses, a voluminous pair of candy-striped bathing trunks, and those handmade leather sandals you can buy in Key West.

Anna leaned forward and switched off the radio. For a while. Professor Qualt remained deeply asleep, but then his nose began to twitch, his eyes blinked open, and he sat up.

"Anna Modena," he said groggily, in a deep, well-modulated voice. "What in the world are you doing here? Hey-please excuse me-I was right in the middle of -"

"Writing up your notes?" said Anna with gentle sarcasm.

Qualt laughed. He had a bluff, hearty laugh that reminded me of a huge, jolly, and thoroughly objectionable quarterback I used to know. He sat up, yawned, stretched his hairy arms, and invited us to sit down on his blanket with him.

"You want a beer?" he asked me. It was then that I began to think he probably wasn't such a bad guy after all. He reached into his lunchbox and brought out a couple of chilled cans of Old Milwaukee, as well as some crackers and Polish salami.

"I should have paid more attention in class," I said wryly. "Maybe I could've made it through college and

spent the rest of my life drinking beer on beaches."

Anna gave me an irritated little frown, but Qualt thought it was funny. He opened up his can of beer and swallowed it in great gulps.

"You know something," said Qualt, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "If only more dropouts would stick it out, they'd earn their way through to the ultimate dropout-the wonderful vacationland of professorship."

Anna shook her head. "He's kidding you, Harry. Professor Qualt here is the most hard-working, brilliant, and dedicated academic you're ever likely to meet."

Qualt laughed again. "That doesn't say much for the rest of them, does it?"

We sat in silence for a moment, then Anna said quietly, "Professor, there's something we want to ask you about."

"Sure. Go ahead. As long as you don't want me to translate 200 pages of original 16th-century Persian poetry, which is what Professor Jaminsky wanted me to do."

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

Qualt shrugged. "I just said that two vitally important things were going to suffer in translation: the poems and me."

"I've found a night-clock," said Anna suddenly.

Totally without warning, Professor Qualt's locker-room personality seemed to drop from him like a damp towel. As soon as Anna mentioned the night-clock, he looked alert and intent. He put down his can of beer and leaned forward. "What?"

"A night-clock," said Anna. "In perfect condition and apparently set up for someone to use."

Qualt bit his lip reflectively. "Where is it?" he asked. "Have you actually seen it for yourselves?"

I nodded. "It's set up on an old sundial in my godmother's garden. She was widowed not long ago. Her husband was in oil, out in Arabia, and he collected a whole pile of Middle Eastern relics. I don't know-maybe he bought the night-clock and never realized what it was. Maybe he thought it was a fancy Arab sundial."

Qualt shook his head slowly. "Nobody will sell you a night-clock in Arabia. You would never be able to get hold of one unless you knew exactly what it was you were looking for, and you were also prepared to spend a great deal of money. They're forbidden, you know."

"Yes," I said. "Anna told me. I still can't figure out why."

Qualt removed his reflecting sunglasses and looked at me closely with cultured, penetrating eyes. He had the same kind of eyes as James Mason - blasé and wearied by what they had seen, but also hurt and sensitive at the same time.

"The reason they're banned is because they work,' he said simply. "Nobody has ever been able to make up their minds as to quite why they work or how, but they have something of the mystic properties of the Great Pyramids. They were supposed to have been invented by Egyptian sorcerers thousands of years before the birth of Christ."

I looked anxiously at Anna. "But if they work,"

I said, "that means that someone is trying to give strength and power to the jar, and if someone is deliberately trying to do that . . ."

Qualt frowned at me, then at Anna. "Do you mind enlightening me?" he asked. "What is someone trying to do deliberately? What jar? What are you talking about?"

Between us, Anna and I explained everything we knew about Max Greaves and his collection; about the Jar of the Djinn; and about the mysterious events of the past day. Professor Qualt didn't seem to be listening at times, but there was a tension about his body that betrayed his absorption and interest. He didn't say a word until we had finished, and after we had brought him up to date, he sat and stared at the colored pattern on his beach blanket for a long time, thinking it all over.

After a while, he rummaged in his discarded linen jacket and brought out a small briar pipe and a pouch of tobacco. He tamped the tobacco into the pipe and lit up, his hands cupped over the bowl. It was only when the tobacco was burning steadily and evenly that he started to talk, the pipe stem clenched between his teeth.

"I think the first thing I ought to say is that I believe you," he remarked. "There are several things which you couldn't possibly have known about unless you had actually seen them for yourself, or unless you were a professor of ancient Middle Eastern cultures, like me. The whole business about the faces, for instance. That's an extremely obscure defense against the resurrection of a djinn, known only to a few Persian sorcerers in the fifth century B.C. They called it-as far as I remember-the Seal of Banished Faces. As you've realized by what has happened at your godmother's house, Mr. Erskine, the removal of all pictures and the portraits is acting as a seal on the reappearance of the djinn."

"But what about Max?" I said. "Why did he cut his own face off, yet leave Marjorie at risk? Surely the djinn could have taken Marjorie's face as well?"

Professor Qualt shook his head. "You don't know very much about Arabs, Mr. Erskine. To them, a woman is a chattel, an inferior. No magical djinn could or would take the face of a woman. The djinn is a powerful spiritual being, and to have the face of a woman would weaken his strength and lay him open to ridicule."

I took a swig of beer. The afternoon was so hot that the can was warm already, and it was like drinking thin soup.

"What's this djinn going to do, though?" I asked Professor Qualt "It obviously terrified Max, but what possible harm can an ancient puff of smoke do to anyone?"

Professor Qualt sucked at his pipe. "No one can say-not without knowing which djinn this jar might

contain. But if it really is the Djinn of Ali Babah, then I would say that you have a considerable amount of trouble on your hands."

"But what kind of trouble? That's what I want to know."

"It's almost impossible to separate fact from legend," explained the professor, "but most of the books and manuscripts that I've read on the subject of Ali Babah's djinn seem to agree on one thing."

"What's that?"

"They agree that Ali Babah's djinn had one characteristic which distinguished it from all the others. It had the ability to change shape, to be whatever it wished to be, within certain magical limits. It could be a cloud of smoke, or a giant centipede, or a hooded leper, or a lion-creature, or one of many other magical varieties of being. Because it was able to change its shape in this way, it was commonly known as the Forty-Stealers of Life. This became shortened to Forty Thieves, although it would have been more accurate to call it the Forty Murderers. Each manifestation of the djinn—each of its forty different manifestations—could inflict death in a different way. By choking, if the djinn became a cloud of smoke. By stinging, if it decided to change itself into a giant centipede. By contagious disease, if it were a leper. By fire, by drowning, by mauling, by suffocation, by disemboweling—forty kinds of death for the asking."

Anna was looking pale. She said to me quietly, "The hooded figure? Could that have been—the leper?"

"It might have been," said Professor Qualt. "But it seems to me that the djinn is not yet free from its jar, and it's more likely that the hooded figure you saw was nothing more than a ghostly servant, one of the lesser beings that the djinn has managed to summon as its helper in its attempt to escape from its jar. Time and space are crowded with miserable shuffling ghosts who can be dominated and ruled by the greater and more illustrious spirits from beyond. Djinnns themselves are the servants of the spirits of dead people. It is said that some spirits keep djinnns in the way that you or I would keep a ferocious dog."

I took out a cigarette. "You sound as though you believe all this."

Professor Qualt shook his head. "I don't, as a matter of fact. I have never seen a ghost and I don't suppose I'd even know what it was if I did. But that's not important. Academically speaking, these things that you've told me have only one rational explanation. There is a jar, and it does contain some kind of phantasmic influence. It appears to be a malevolent influence, and therefore it could be the Forty Thieves,

If it is, then the best thing you can do is to get as far away from that house and that jar as you possibly can. The Forty Thieves is no joke."

Anna looked worried. "Can't we exorcise it?" she suggested. "Couldn't a priest get rid of it?"

Professor Qualt pressed some more tobacco into his pipe. "The djinn is a spirit of Islamic culture. No Christian clergyman is going to be able to make any kind of impression at all. Bell, book and candle? I don't think so."

"So what do you suggest we do?" I asked him.

Professor Qualt looked up with those hurt, tired eyes. "I've told you," he said. "Get the hell out. If that djinn ever escapes, all you'll get for your trouble is one of forty particularly nasty types of extinction."

"But I can't do that," I said. "My godmother is there. And so is her hired companion."

"Take them with you," said Qualt. "Take them with you and burn the whole place down to the ground, just like your godfather suggested."

"Qualt," I said, "you can't be serious."

"Of course I'm serious."

"But it doesn't make sense. The thing to do is to get rid of the jar, not commit wholesale arson on a lovely old seaside house."

Qualt didn't look up. "It's up to you," he said. "I believe your story, and that's what makes it worse. If you try and tamper with that jar-particularly now, when the djinn is thirsting to escape - you'll find yourself with more trouble on your hands than you know how to cope with."

Anna had a downcast, disappointed expression. It was obvious that she had expected more positive help from Professor Qualt. After all, he was supposed to be the great crusader, dedicated to the cause of returning priceless antiquities to their mother countries. Now-without even looking at the Jar of the Djinn-he was telling us to destroy it.

"Professor Qualt,' said Anna. "Would you just come and look at the jar? Just give it a quick once-over, so we know we're not making any mistakes?"

Professor Qualt sighed. "Well - I'm supposed to be writing up these notes," he said reluctantly.

"Please, Professor," begged Anna. "Just look at the night-clock and the jar itself, then I'll be satisfied."

Professor Qualt thought for a moment. It was plain that he took his leisure time seriously, and that he didn't relish the idea of driving all the way back along the Cape in mid-August heat for the sole purpose of looking at an old jar. But this wasn't just any old jar, and there was a night-clock to inspect, and academic curiosity was struggling hard in the favor of checking them out.

In the end, Qualt said, "Okay-just give me a chance to pack up my stuff and get dressed." Anna and I both let out sighs of relief, stood up and helped him fold up his beach blanket and stow away his lunchbox.

As we drove toward Winter Sails, Professor Qualt leaned forward from the back of the car and filled us in with more details of the Ali Babah legend.

"The Arabs used to say that Ali Babah had made a pact with a strange and evil sect of necromancers who lived in the hills. These wizards performed extraordinary and quite obscene rites, one of which was said to involve carrying around a young girl on top of a long pole which had been pushed through her vagina. This sect is sometimes known as the N'zwaa or the Unswa, and sometimes by an unpronounceable name which means Those-Who-Adore-The-Terrible."

Professor Qualt opened the rear window and lit up his pipe again.

"The thing was that Ali Babah was losing his magical influence. A great wizard from Bagdad, Ali Shama, was becoming a favorite at court, leaving Ali Babah out in the cold. Ali Shama was said to be able to make carpets fly and dead people come to life. Ali Babah, although he was a very good sorcerer, could do neither of these things, nor many of Ali Shama's other tricks, and he was very annoyed.

"That's when he went to the N'zwaa. It was a risky thing to do, because, from what I've heard, the N'zwaa would just as soon kill you as say good morning. He made a pact that if they could summon a great and terrible djinn for his personal use, he would let them have, every year forever, a young girl for their religious rituals and their personal amusement. The N'zwaa agreed. They conjured up for Ali Babah one of their foulest djinns, the Forty Stealers of Life, and in return he gave them, so it's said, the thirteen-year-old daughter of a friend. What disgusting things the N'zwaa did to this girl-or any of the other girls that Ali Babah gave them-is not recorded. But one ancient legend says that each girl took seven weeks to die."

Anna shuddered. "That's awful," she said. "But did Ali Babah get his influence back?"

"So they say," answered Professor Qualt. "Not long after Ali Babah's return from the hills, AH Shama was found dead in his bed. In the night, some kind of tick had burrowed its way into his ear and through his brain. Nobody said anything about it, but most people believed that this insect had been Ali Babah's djinn, manifesting itself in one of its forty revolting forms."

I checked my watch. "Another fifteen minutes and we'll be there." I looked in my mirror and pulled out to overtake a large trailer.

"What I want to know," said Anna, "is why the djinn so desperately needs a face? If it can turn itself into a giant centipede or a tick or a puff of smoke, why does it need a face?"

Professor Qualt took the pipe out of his mouth. "I can only tell you what the legends tell us," he said. "If a djinn is sealed by the Seal of Banished Faces, then it is unable to take what they call its master form. In other words, even a djinn with forty different manifestations has to have one fundamental manifestation, which in most cases is a human one-or quasi-human, anyway. Without a master form, it's a bit like asking a composer to write forty variations on a theme without giving him the theme."

For the rest of the journey, we were silent. As we drove nearer and nearer to Winter Sails, I began to grow increasingly apprehensive, especially since the light was beginning to fail, and it would soon be dark. We passed the slanted trees, bounced down the driveway, and there was the pallid house with its sinister Gothic turret and its scimitar weathervane. Behind it, the sea was marked with flecks of white

foam, and the last of the sailboats were heading home.

Suddenly, Anna tensed. "Who's that?" she said, pointing into the shadow of the driveway.

I eased my brakes on immediately and peered through the windshield. It was a young kid on a bicycle. He was wearing a striped T-shirt and a back-to-front baseball cap, and he was whistling as he cycled along. I rolled down the car window and called, "Hey, son!"

The boy stopped beside me. He had a freckled nose and two front teeth missing. "Yes, sir?"

"Have you been down to the house?"

"Yes, sir. I was."

"What for?"

"I delivered the papers, sir, and Time."

Professor Qualt leaned forward from the back seat. "You delivered Time?" he said tautly.

"Sure. That's what they asked for. They called up the store and asked for it. This is my last trip today."

Professor Qualt slumped back in the seat "We may be too late already," he said worriedly. "Maybe we ought to forget the whole thing and turn back."

"Why?" said Anna. "What's wrong?"

"Don't you understand? Time is full of pictures of faces. Now the Forty Stealers of Life has everything it needs to escape. It's probably escaped already. That house is harboring the most horrible and evil-hearted spirit you could ever imagine."

Almost as if she had been listening to what Professor Qualt was saying, Marjorie, in her long black dress, suddenly flung open the front door of Winter Sails and began to run across the main lawn, her arms raised in the air. She fled away so fast that it looked as if she was actually shrinking in size.

Chapter 5

We watched in fascinated horror as Marjorie stumbled across the lawn. She seemed to be beating or flapping at something in the air just behind her, even though we couldn't see anything there at all. When the sea breeze gusted in our direction, we could hear that she was shrieking. A thin, high-pitched, terrified shriek.

Without a word, I gunned the Cougar's engine, swerved off the driveway, and began to drive across the grass. The car bounced and swayed, and both Professor Qualt and Anna were gripping the armrests for dear life. I circled around in front of Marjorie and stopped. She came running toward us and collapsed against the side of the car, still twitching and beating at her invisible pursuer.

Qualt and I pushed our way out of the car and knelt down beside her. Her eyes had rolled up into her head so that only the whites showed, and she was shaking and shivering and mumbling. Her thin legs, in their wrinkled gray stockings, lay like two broken sticks.

"Marjorie," I said gently. "Marjorie, it's Harry." She didn't seem to hear me. She was moaning and mumbling, and her arms still jerked feebly at the terrible thing that wasn't there. It was strange, though, because I thought I caught the dry, leathery sound of flapping wings. I looked up quickly, and there was nothing there at all. Just the dark-smudged sky, the gathering shadows, and the curiously luminous shape of Winter Sails.

"Marjorie," I said "Can you hear me, Marjorie? It's Harry."

Again, there was no answer. Professor Qualt took her pulse against his wristwatch, and then placed his hand carefully against her forehead.

"Is she okay?" I asked him.

He grimaced. "She's not dead, if that's what you mean. But I think we ought to call a doctor,"

"There's a phone in the house," I said. "I think we'd better call Dr. Jarvis. He looked after Max, and he knows what's going on."

Anna said, "Where's Miss Johnson? That's what I want to know."

"Who's Miss Johnson?" said Professor Qualt. "Marjorie's companion," I told him. "She was here, too. I just hope that--"

Professor Qualt looked at me, and I let the sentence hang.

"Don't let's leap to any premature conclusions," he said. "The first thing we need to do is have this

woman looked after."

We lifted Marjorie carefully into the back of the car, and I turned around and drove slowly back across the lawn toward the front of the house. Oddly, the door through which Marjorie had burst just a few minutes before was now firmly dosed, I climbed out, crunched across the gravel, and pushed it. It was securely locked. I rang the bell and knocked with my fist. There was no reply, Marjorie, sprawled in the back of the car, started moaning.

"I think we'd better take her ourselves," said Anna. "Come on, Harry. Dr. Jarvis's place isn't far. Miss Johnson may be there, but she isn't going to answer."

Reluctantly, I left the porch and went back to the car. I didn't know what the hell was going on, and I began to feel that I didn't particularly want to know. But Marjorie was sick, and if she was sick, then we were going to have to look after her. I slammed the car door, switched on the headlights, and we moved off into the dusk.

During the short journey, Marjorie seemed to be sleeping or unconscious for most of the time. But as we approached Dr. Jarvis's elegant house, she began to babble and moan, moving her arms and legs as if fighting off some unspeakable horror. She kept wiping herself as if there was some kind of slime or dirt on her sleeve, and twitching her head from side to side.

Dr. Jarvis had just gotten back from a round of golf. Dressed in elegant English tweeds, he was just as imposing and gray-haired and graceful as ever. When he saw Marjorie, however, he was visibly shaken. He helped us carry her into the house and lay her down on the couch in his big mahogany-paneled consulting room. Then he deftly checked her vital signs and gave her a mild sedative to calm her down.

"It could be delayed shock from Max's death," said Dr. Jarvis slowly, watching his patient sink gradually into an uneasy sleep. "On the other hand, there are signs of hysterical anxiety as well."

"What does that mean?" asked Anna.

Professor Qualt coughed. "It means fright, Anna. She's been badly frightened."

Dr. Jarvis agreed. "Her symptoms seem consistent with that. Is it too much to ask if you know what might have caused such a condition?"

Dr. Jarvis looked at Professor Qualt, and Professor Qualt looked at Anna, and then they all looked at me.

"You're the experts," I told them. "But if you want my opinion, I think there's been too much speculation and myth so far, and not enough solid fact. What about Miss Johnson, for instance?"

"What about her?" asked Dr. Jarvis.

"Well, we don't know who she really is, or where she came from. For all we know, she might have set this entire business up. For insurance, or a legacy, or a practical joke. Maybe she knows how much the Jar of the Djinn is really worth and wants to make off with it."

"It can't be a joke, Harry," said Anna. "The Jar of the Djinn is for real. You know it is. You saw that hooded figure yourself. And you heard the music as well as I did."

"I'm not saying it isn't for real," I insisted. "But I don't want us to get ourselves into a blind panic just because we don't understand what's going on."

Professor Qualt took out his pipe and solemnly filled the bowl with tobacco. "I think you're right. Mr. Erskine," he said. "But I also think that there's considerable evidence that the Jar of the Djinn is exerting some kind of evil influence over your godmother and over your godmother's house. I wouldn't say the evidence is overwhelming, but it's enough to make me think that we ought to take fairly stringent precautions."

"Such as what? What precautions can you take against a genie in a jar?"

Professor Qualt applied a match to his pipe and sucked it noisily. "There are many ways of keeping a djinn under control. At least, the myths and the legends say there are. Whether they really work, or whether they're just fanciful speculation, one can never find out."

I shrugged. "You can always test them on a real djinn," I said. "But then what happens if they don't work?"

Professor Qualt puffed smoke. "If this djinn is really the Forty Thieves of Ali Babah, then I would think that anyone who tried to control it and failed would not be very worried about the answer to that."

"That's the trouble with you academics," I said. "You're so goddamn optimistic." For a while, we looked down thoughtfully on Marjorie's silently sleeping body, then Dr. Jarvis said, "Whatever is really going on, I do believe that it is incumbent upon us to make sure that no harm has come to Miss Johnson. Is it too much to ask that you go round there and satisfy yourselves that she's safe?"

"We tried to find her just now," said Anna, "but she didn't answer the door."

"Well," said Dr. Jarvis, "that's a large house, and I expect she didn't hear you. Perhaps she was upstairs,"

"Yes," I said, "perhaps she was. If so, I'd like to know where."

"Will you drive us?" Professor Qualt asked me. "I really think we ought to check this out."

We were just about to leave when Marjorie began to stir again. Her lips moved, and her hands began to tremble and twitch. Dr. Jarvis immediately checked her pulse and her respiration again, pushing her eyelids back with his thumb to examine her eyes.

"How is she?" asked Anna.

Dr. Jarvis frowned. "She's still in shock. It's not serious, but it seems to be persistent. I think I'm going to have to call an ambulance for her."

"Do you have to?" I said. "If you call in the hospital, the police are going to find out. You know how

Marjorie felt about Max and the way he died. They're bound to ask questions."

Dr. Jarvis said, "If there's any danger to Marjorie's life, they'll just have to ask questions. I'm not going to protect a secret at the risk of a woman's life. Especially this woman-she's an old friend of mine."

As he spoke, Marjorie shuddered and began to whisper. Dr. Jarvis bent over her white, wrinkled face. "Marjorie? Can you hear me, Marjorie? Are you all right?"

Marjorie answered something but Dr. Jarvis didn't appear to understand. He leaned closer. "Marjorie, are you all right? How do you feel?"

Again she whispered something, but again he was baffled. He stood up and said, "She seems to be speaking in some sort of foreign language."

"Let me try," said Anna. She and Dr. Jarvis changed places, and she held her ear as close as she could to the old woman's lips. "Marjorie? It's Anna. Will you speak to me, Marjorie?"

Marjorie started whispering again, in a hoarse, hollow voice. She was obviously speaking in coherent sentences, yet I couldn't recognize the language she was speaking at all. Anna, however, obviously did, because when Marjorie fell silent again, she asked her a question in the same language. "What's she saying?" I asked Professor Qualt. Qualt, who appeared to understand at least some of what was going on, raised his finger to his lips. "I'll tell you in a minute," he said. "This is very important."

It was important, and it was also very long. Anna and Marjorie whispered together for almost ten minutes, and by the time they had finished, I was growing edgy and impatient. From the expression on Professor Qualt's face, Marjorie was saying something more than alarming. He was biting at his pipe stem like a big, black, hairy mastiff chewing through its leash. Eventually, Marjorie began to wander. Her voice grew blurrier, and she stopped jerking and twitching and fell off to sleep. Dr. Jarvis checked her pulse again and said, "She seems to be better now. I think she could do with a few hours rest. If you want to leave her here, I assure you she'll be quite all right"

I nodded my thanks. Dr. Jarvis pulled a blanket over Marjorie's small sleeping form, then ushered us quietly into the drawing room.

The French doors that led to the garden were open and a breeze wafted through the room. Dr. Jarvis drew up three small antique armchairs and bade us sit down. He went over to a dark oak cabinet and took out four glasses. "After that," he said, "I think we could all do with some Dutch courage. I have some excellent Scotch here that my brother brought back from his vacation."

While he poured them out, we looked around the room. It was traditionally but tastefully decorated with floral French wallpaper, elegant little antique side tables, and a carved-wood fireplace. There were several old oil paintings of English landscapes on the walls, and a collection of eighteenth-century miniatures. It obviously pays to be a family doctor in the wealthier parts of Massachusetts.

Dr. Jarvis handed out the Scotch, then sat down himself. We drank the pungent malt whiskey without a word, then Anna said uneasily, "I suppose you want to know what Marjorie said."

"I caught some of it," said Professor Qualt. "It was a dialect, wasn't it? One of the old Persian hill dialects?"

Anna nodded. "It was a very old and very obscure language that was used by an isolated group of wise men who were said to have lived in exile in the Persian mountains. I only know it because I once had to translate some old pharmacological documents that had originated with this group, and I almost had to learn parts of their grammar and syntax by heart"

"What are the chances of Marjorie knowing it?" I said coldly. "I mean, fluently enough to speak it like that?"

"It's impossible to say without asking her when she's conscious," said Anna. "She may have learned it to help her husband with his work. But it does seem strange. There can't be more than ten people in the whole world who could speak it like that I can understand it - most of it - but I couldn't put together more than two or three sentences."

I took a small sip of Scotch. "Marjorie told us that she wasn't interested in Max's antiques. If she wasn't interested" why would she take the trouble to learn a ridiculous language like that?"

"Maybe she didn't learn it," said Professor Qualt crossing his big, plaid-trousered legs. "Maybe she was speaking by hypnosis or suggestion of some kind. Speaking in tongues. It has been known."

"It is those who are possessed by evil spirits that are supposed to speak in tongues,' said Dr. Jarvis quietly. "It is one of the tests of demonic presence."

I took a cigarette out of my breast pocket and lit it "I think we'd better take one thing at a time," I said. "First of all, Anna, what did she say?"

Anna brushed her dark hair away from her face.

In the lamplight of Dr. Jarvis' drawing room, she looked more foxy-eyed and beautiful than ever. She licked her lips before she started speaking, which made them glisten as she told us what Marjorie Greaves had whispered to her in the consulting room.

"It's difficult to translate everything exactly," she said. "The wise men who spoke this dialect had completely different concepts of life than those we have today, and so some of the ideas have no modern parallel. But as far as I could understand it, she was telling a kind of story. Professor Qualt might be able to correct me if I've got any of it wrong.

"It was a story about a beautiful young girl who was her father's favorite. She was going to be married to a wealthy young man and spend all the rest of her years in luxury and happiness. Even though the marriage had been arranged by their parents, the two young people were deeply in love with each other, and they were both looking forward to the lavish wedding ceremony and the wedding night.

"Then, one evening just before the wedding, a powerful wizard entered the beautiful young girl's house in the guise of a beggar and abducted her. She was to be taken away and given as a gift to a group of strange men, or wild men-I'm not sure of the translation there."

"Fanatical men," said Professor Qualt. "That's the nearest interpretation. The word is often used in other dialects to describe religious cranks."

"Anyway, the girl was going to be tortured slowly and eventually killed. But she had a plain and unbecoming sister who discovered what had happened to her and followed the wizard back to his house. When this girl learned what was going to befall her beautiful sister, she somehow managed to make a

pact with the wizard's most powerful demon or jinni. The pact was that if the beautiful young bride-to-be was allowed to go free, the plain sister would become the jinni's whore for as long as she lived and would marry no other man. Is that how you understood it, Professor Qualt?"

Professor Qualt nodded. "So far, so good," he said. "It's the next bit that confused me."

"It's difficult to understand; it was spoken in difficult language. But as far as I can make out, the plain sister made a promise to herself that one day she would return from the dead and seek her revenge on the wizard and his jinni for their evil and their treachery. Evidently, even though the plain sister became the jinni's whore and was forced to have sexual relations with him in many different and appalling forms and guises, the beautiful sister was still sacrificed to the fanatical men, and died a slow and terrible death. One of the things they did was slice her open and sew a huge live snake into her womb, and there were other tortures and rituals too atrocious even to mention."

We sat silently when Anna had finished. I took a large swallow of Scotch and enjoyed the mellifluous burning of neat spirit in my throat. Dr. Jarvis stood rigid and silent, looking out over his dusky lawns, and Professor Qualt was sitting hunched forward with his head buried in his hands. After a while, Professor Qualt sat up straight

"Well," he said. "I know what we're all thinking. The question is-do we take it seriously or not?"

Anna put down her drink. "I don't see how we can fail to take it seriously," she said. "What Marjorie has just told us, in this ancient and peculiar language, is exactly what you were saying about the way in which Ali Babah acquired his Forty Thieves. The girl sacrifices to the N'zwaa. It all ties up."

Qualt stroked his chin thoughtfully and stared at Anna with his pained, James Mason eyes. "That's true, Anna, that's true. But anyone who knows anything about ancient Middle Eastern sorcery will know that story. There must be books about it at your godmother's house, Mr. Erskine. And if she knew the language, well, she was likely to know the legends and myths of that language, too."

I ground out my cigarette. "The only flaw in that perfectly plausible explanation, Professor Qualt, is that Marjorie was a poor linguist and took no interest in Middle Eastern antiquities at all. She told me that Max used to send them back from his tours of duty, and she didn't even bother to unwrap them. You can't get more disinterested than that."

Dr. Jarvis turned around, his hands thrust into the coat pockets of his elegant tweeds. "In that case," he said, "how did she come to know this ancient language so fluently? Is she possessed? Or hypnotized? Or are we all imagining things?"

"I think it's impossible," said Anna quietly.

"You think what's impossible?" asked Professor Qualt.

"I think it's impossible for Marjorie Greaves to know that ancient language. It just doesn't make sense."

"Executives and politicians have been known to learn Russian almost overnight by certain methods," put in Professor Qualt. I got the feeling he was testing the strength of Anna's belief rather than criticizing her.

Anna shook her head. "This dialect can't be learned like that. It's like learning kung-fu without discovering the inner meaning and disciplines of Oriental culture. You can go through the motions of fighting in a kung-fu style, but you can never be what kung-fu is all about, not unless you have all the inner peace and discipline that is necessary. And you can't learn inner peace and discipline in one night, not even if you're an executive or a politician. Especially not if you're an executive or a politician."

Professor Qualt sucked his pipe approvingly. "All right, then," he said. "What alternatives does that leave us with?"

There was a silence. Then Dr. Jarvis said, "As far as I can perceive, we are left with just two. Either Mrs. Greaves was possessed by a demon which spoke through her lips in its own tongue, or else she was hypnotized by someone and given these words to speak, even though she didn't know what they meant."

"Which possibility do you think is more likely?" asked Professor Qualt. He was speaking to us like a patient university lecturer prodding his students into constructive thought, but none of us minded. It was refreshing to have someone around who could strain your analytical faculties. Usually, my logic consisted of leaping to a series of rather bizarre conclusions.

"It's more likely that she was hypnotized," I said. "I'm not saying I don't believe in demons, but there are

far more authenticated cases of hypnotism than there are authenticated cases of demonic possession. Apart from that, demons give me the creeps."

Professor Qualt smiled. "Okay. Supposing she was hypnotized. Who did it and why?"

"Well, as far as we know," said Anna, "there are only two other people at Winter Sails. Miss Johnson and this strange hooded figure."

"The hooded figure we don't know anything about," said Professor Qualt. "But we do know a little about Miss Johnson. Have you any idea why she might hypnotize Mrs. Greaves, even supposing she could?"

We were just thinking about that one when there was a rap at the drawing room door. Dr. Jarvis said, "Come in," and Mrs. Jarvis appeared. She was a small, bright-faced woman with a flowery print dress and a halo of white hair.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," she said, "but the door's stuck."

"What door?" said Dr. Jarvis. "Not the cellar door again?"

"No, dear, the consulting room door. I was going in to take Marjorie's pulse and temperature, but I can't get it open."

"It isn't locked," said Dr. Jarvis. "I never lock it, except at night."

"Well, I wish you'd come and have a look," said Mrs. Jarvis. "I've tried pulling it, and I've tried pushing it, but nothing works."

Anna smiled. "You're a strong guy, Harry. Perhaps you can budge it."

"Strong?" I said. "They used to call me Before at school, because I looked like the Before guy in the Charles Atlas ads. When I want to tear a telephone directory in half, I have to do it page by page."

Nonetheless, I followed Mrs. Jarvis into the corridor and up to the white consulting room door. I tried the handle, and she was right. It was jammed. I pushed my shoulder against it, but still it wouldn't budge. It was set so firm and hard, it seemed to be double-locked. I rattled the handle and called, "Marjorie! Are you in there?"

We waited, but there was no reply. I called again, "Marjorie, did you lock this door? Wake up,

"Marjorie!"

Again, there was nothing but silence. Mrs. Jarvis said, "The windows are all shut, too, or you could have climbed in that way."

"You can see in, though, can't you?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "The windows are painted cream halfway up. It's to keep passersby from looking in."

"Do you have a key?"

She held it up. "I've tried it. It doesn't seem to work."

I took the key and fiddled around with it for a while. While I was fiddling with it, I was sure that I heard slight noises inside the consulting room. I stopped twisting the key and pressed my ear to the door, but the noises had stopped. I fiddled some more, and when I did, I was sure I could hear the noises again.

They were soft, flapping noises, like the beating of dry wings.

I listened again, but there was silence. I said to Mrs., Jarvis, "It looks as if we're going to have to force this door open. Do you mind?"

"Well, if you have to, you have to. There should be a crowbar under the stairs."

She opened the cupboard under the stairs for me, and I rummaged around amid old golf trophies and broken picture frames until I found a rusty crowbar at the back. I dusted it off and took it to the consulting room. Just in case, I tried the handle and the key once more, but they still didn't work.

I jammed the crowbar into the side of the door and heaved. The soft old wood splintered easily, and soon the door began to give way. There was a final crackling, and it swung open.

I looked around. It was dark inside the consulting room, even though we had left the light on. I peered over toward the couch, and I could see Marjorie's stockinged feet, just as they were. I switched on the light and walked over to see if she was all right.

"Oh, my God," I said. It was all I could think of.

Marjorie was dead. There didn't seem to be any marks on her at all, but she was clutching her hands tight to her chest as if to fight something off. Her eyes were wide open and staring, and her mouth was horribly drawn, as if in a silent scream.

Dr. Jarvis had heard the door crack and he was right behind me. He took one look over my shoulder at Marjorie's body and immediately checked for pulse-rate, for respiration, for any vital sign that she could still be saved. It was only after three or four minutes of quick, urgent checks that he let her thin hand fall on her chest again and stood up straight "I'm sorry," he said gravely. "She is quite dead."

"Do you know how?" I asked him. I felt queasy and faint, but I still had to know.

Dr. Jarvis drew a starched white sheet over her body and covered her face. "She was frightened," he said. "It looks as if something frightened her."

"In here? You're kidding."

Dr. Jarvis turned around angrily. "I don't know what's going on any more than you do!" he shouted. He was very upset. "See for yourself! There's every sign of death by hysterical spasm! It happens all the time! Even people who get hanged often die of fear before their necks are broken! "

I went to the window and rattled it. It was locked. So was the window on the other side of the room. There was no way out of either of them.

Dr. Jarvis sat down nervously and watched me check the room. Nothing was broken, nothing was marked. Nothing was disarranged.

"I can't understand it," he said, more calmly now. "I just can't understand it."

"You can't understand what?"

"Mr. Erskine, if you die of fear something usually frightens you. What could possibly have frightened Marjorie in here?"

I took a final look around. Then Professor Qualt and Anna came in. I turned away, while Dr. Jarvis told them what had happened. I was too shocked, too anxious, to talk to anyone else right now. I had been told about Max's death, and I had seen Marjorie frightened. I had been frightened a couple of times myself. But now I had seen what the djinn could really do. I was sure now unshakably sure-that whatever was in that jar was directly responsible for everything that was going on. Somehow we had to gain access to Winter Sails and get rid of it-no matter how dangerous it was. I didn't want Miss Johnson dead, and I didn't want Anna dead. Nor did I want Professor Qualt or Dr. Jarvis dead. And most of all, I didn't fancy dying myself. Not like that, anyway. Not with ray eyes bulging open in terror and my mouth dragged down in a howl that I was too frightened even to let out.

"What happened?" said Professor Qualt. "Did you see anything?"

I shook my head. "No, but I'm pretty sure I heard something."

"You heard something?" said Dr. Jarvis. "What was it?"

"Well," I said slowly. "You know when you're lying in bed at night, and a big moth somehow strays into the room and starts to flicker and beat around the lampshade, and all the time you're afraid that it's going to flicker right into your face? That's what I heard. Something that sounded just like that."

Dr. Jarvis, biting his lip, went over and picked up the phone.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"I'm calling the police-what do you think? We can't allow this kind of thing to carry on."

"And do you seriously think the police are going to believe us? And do you seriously think they could or would do anything about it if they did? Come on, doctor, let's be realistic"

Dr. Jarvis pointed to Marjorie's body. "If you think Marjorie's death has anything to do with realism, you can be as realistic as you like. But I think it's supernatural. And that's why I'm going to call the police."

Professor Qualt went over and gently took the receiver away from Dr. Jarvis's nervous hand. "Who are you going to call?" he said in his deep, even voice. "The Ghost Squad?"

It was nearly ten o'clock in the evening before we decided to go back to Winter Sails. It was dark now, a thick velvety dark that enclosed us like the inside of a violin case. The moon was not yet up, and there was a strange suffocating stillness. We climbed into the car in silence, and I started the engine. The green glow from the instrument panel made our faces look distinctly unwholesome.

"Do you think it was all right to leave Dr. Jarvis behind?" asked Anna.

"Why?" said Professor Qualt, leaning over from the back seat. "He's old enough to take care of himself."

"Yes," said Anna, "but supposing he calls the police?"

I switched on my headlights, took a look around, and then pulled away from the curb. "He promised not to," I said. "And Dr. Jarvis is one of those old-time gentlemen who keep their promise. Don't worry."

I drove quickly down the illuminated tunnel that my headlights carved in the soft darkness. Moths and bugs glimmered and twisted in front of us. I turned out of Dr. Jarvis's street onto the main highway and made my way toward Winter Sails. The road was deserted, so I put my foot down and drove all the way at sixty.

A crescent moon was just rising over the sea by the time we reached Winter Sails. It silvered the lawns and the rooftops, and gave a bleached bone-like whiteness to the house and its empty windows. I drew up in front of the main porch and killed the engine.

For a minute or two, we sat in silence. There was no sound at all, except for the sibilant sea breeze through the grass, and the monotonous squeaking of the weathervane.

"Looks empty to me," said Anna in an overawed hush.

"Just as well," said Professor Qualt "If there's no one around, we can have a look at that jar with no interference."

I lit a cigarette with the car lighter. "You wanna bet?" I asked him. "Ten to one every shadow in the whole place has a hooded figure lurking in it."

Professor Qualt gave a strained little laugh. "If I didn't know you believed this as much as I do," he said, "I'd make you go first."

Eventually, we climbed out of the car and stepped carefully across the gravel to the front door. I knocked and rang, just in case, but after three or four fidgety minutes waiting for someone to answer, we decided that there was nobody home - at least nobody who was going to answer the door.

"Can you force it open?" said Professor Qualt.

I gave him a thumb's-up, went to the side of the porch, and collected the pick that I had propped up there when Marjorie had told me to leave. We all stood back, and I took a hefty swing at the old white woodwork.

"Smashing doors down seems to be your specialty," said Anna, as the point of the pick buried itself in the doorjamb, near the lock.

This one, however, was much more difficult than the door of Dr. Jarvis's consulting room. It was heavily bolted on the inside, top and bottom, and I practically had to chop the whole thing to pieces.

"I just hope this is justified," said Professor Qualt, sounding a little nervous. I gave one more splintering swing with the pick, and the door sagged open. Inside, it was musty and dark, and I could just make out the pattern of the black-and-white hallway floor. Professor Qualt stepped forward and had a close look around. "Okay, I think it's safe to go in."

"Safe?" I said to Anna, as Qualt stepped through the door ahead of us. "What does he mean?"

"I presume he's looking for evil charms and signs," said Anna. "You never know what traps and ambushes an enemy might leave for you."

Professor Qualt was in the hallway itself by now, and he beckoned us impatiently inside. "Hurry," he said. "If we have any advantage at all, we've arrived by surprise, and our intentions are not yet clear. If there is a djinn here, it will wait to discover what we want before it takes any defensive measures."

I followed him across to the foot of the stairs. They rose gloomily toward the second floor and looked about as inviting as the entrance to a haunted mineshaft.

"You're taking this very seriously," I said. "Are you sure we're not making fools of ourselves?"

Professor Qualt coughed. "I'd rather look a fool than end up like your godfather," he said gently. "The point is, we simply don't know what it is we're up against, so I'd rather take every precaution we can,"

"Okay then," I said. "We'd better go up and see what it's all about. It's up the stairs, along the corridor to the very end, and then turn left to the turret door. That's where the seals and the locks are. I'll take the pick, just in case we can't break the seals any other way."

Professor Qualt led the way, and we creaked up the old wooden stairs, holding onto the handrail to guide us, I suggested we switch on the lights, but Qualt said it would give the djinn the added advantage of being able to see who and what we were. And if it wasn't a djinn, but a flesh-and-blood enemy, our arrival in pitch-darkness would have the same surprising effect.

We reached the landing and strained our eyes to see down the long stuffy corridor. The moon was sloping through the open door of Max Greaves's study, and through the window at the far end of the corridor that overlooked the driveway; it gave the place an eerie luminosity.

"I think this is getting too spooky for me," Anna whispered. "Don't anybody mention hooded figures, or I think I'll faint."

Keeping close together, we walked slowly and softly up the corridor. The floorboards were old and squeaky in places, and the furry sound of rats scampering across the ceiling above our heads didn't add to our peace of mind. Anna reached forward and squeezed my hand, and even the bold Professor Qualt seemed to be walking with less buoyancy than he had before.

Suddenly Anna stopped. Because she was holding my hand, I stopped, too. I touched Professor Qualt.

"What is it?" he said. "What's wrong?"

"Listen," said Anna. "Listen."

I listened, and for a moment I could hear nothing at all. But then it reached my ears. That high-pitched, plangent music, like a mournful wind whistling across the mouth of a jar, or a curious string instrument of unknown antiquity. It seemed very close - it seemed all around us-and we all felt the same freezing sense of fright.

Chapter 6

The music reached an odd vibrant warbling pitch and went on and on and on, monotonous, yet strangely insistent, as if it were trying to build up to a tempo it could never reach.

"It's the jar," said Anna in a hollow, frightened voice. "It's the jar."

Professor Qualt said nothing. He simply took us both by the hand and led us down the corridor, through the slanting moonlight that fell from Max Greaves's study like a shower of ice, and down toward the end of the empty hall. At last we stood at the juncture of corridors, which was lit by the eerie moonlight that fell from the window overlooking the driveway. We stared in nervous fascination at the heavily sealed and bolted turret door.

The music kept on. It was difficult to tell if it was the sound of a stringed instrument or the high-pitched keening of a human voice.

Professor Qualt stepped up to the turret door and examined the brown wax seals in the moonlight. As he did so, the music began to fade away, and after a minute or two, the corridor was silent again. We stood stock-still, our ears alert for the slightest sound-especially from within the turret- and we waited for Professor Quail's opinion.

"There's no doubt about it," he whispered after a while. "These seals have been set here to imprison a powerful djinn. They are all very rare and ancient carvings; some of them are completely unknown to me. That one there-those figures carved in a kind of triangle-was banned from Middle Eastern countries as long ago as the thirteenth century. This is sorcery of the highest kind. We can't laugh this off, Harry. Not for a moment."

I coughed. "I wasn't suggesting that we laugh it off," I said hoarsely. "But what about that music? You've heard it for yourself now. Where does it come from?"

Professor Qualt scratched the back of his hairy neck. "Do you think I know, any more than you do? Who knows where it comes from? In sorcery you don't think about where things come from; you talk about when and how. Nothing in real Middle Eastern sorcery has a where to its name. Where is God? Where is Heaven? Where are the angels? Those are earthbound questions that just don't make sense."

"So you think the music is some land of spiritual manifestation?"

Professor Qualt shrugged. "I don't honestly know what it is. I have heard of strange sounds and music before, in Western ghost stories; but I have never heard anything like that. It reminds me vaguely of that ritual music played to the god Pan in parts of the northern Sahara."

"You think it's magic music?" asked Anna.

"I don't know. But from what you say, Max Greaves heard it as well, and for some reason it worried him."

We listened again for any strange noises within the turret, but it was quite silent. We heard only the squeaking of the weathervane and the fitful blowing of the night wind from the sea. Every now and then, the old house creaked, as if settling itself in its endless sleep and dreams of all the people, now dead, who had walked along its corridors.

"Well," I said. "The jar's in there. Perhaps we'd better get that door down and see what's going on."

I lifted my pick and started to scrape at some of the wax with the point of it. I figured that four or five hard blows at the paneling would get us through, in spite of the iron bar across the center of the door and all the elaborate tapes and seals and hairs.

I held the pick firmly in both hands and drew back for my first swing. Suddenly, I realized that there was someone else standing next to me. Not just Professor Qualt and Anna. But someone else. I lowered the pick with a nervous spasm and turned around. There, in the slowly moving moonlight, in a long rust-colored cotton gown, was Miss Johnson. Her face was white and set, and she was raising her hand as if to point at me or call to me.

"Miss Johnson?" I snapped. It was half-anger, half-fright, that made me speak like that. "Miss Johnson, what's going on here?"

She stepped silently forward. Now the moonlight had left her face, illuminating only her glasses like two shining coins.

"Mr. Erskine," she whispered. "You must not touch that door."

"Miss Johnson," I said, "it's time that someone did. Did you know that Mrs. Greaves is dead?"

There was a pause. Then she said, "I guessed as much. I'm very sorry."

"You guessed?" said Professor Qualt

"Of course," replied Miss Johnson, turning her head in his direction. "She meddled with things that she didn't understand, and it was bound to happen." She was quiet for a moment, then she said, "I assure you that her death had nothing to do with me. I simply guessed, that's all. I didn't know what he was going to do."

"He?" I asked her. "Who's he?"

Miss Johnson lowered her head and the two shining coins dropped down a dark well. "I think we'd better talk about this downstairs," she said. "It makes the jar very unsettled if we're as close as this. It knows what's happening, you know. It's very unpredictable, too; you can never quite tell what it's going to do next."

Professor Qualt said, "If you like, we'll talk about it downstairs. But I think Mr. Erskine here deserves an explanation. It's not every day you lose your godfather and your godmother and gain a companion, is it?"

Miss Johnson whispered, "No, I suppose not."

She turned and led the way back down the corridor, her rust-colored dress rustling on the pinewood flooring. When we reached the large drawing room, she lit oil lamps all "around, and soon we were sitting face to face by the flickering yellow glow of seven or eight sooty lamps.

"No electricity?" I asked her.

Miss Johnson nodded. "There is, but I don't really like to. Mr. Max always used to say that electrical power belonged to the devil, and I'm always worried in case I inadvertently give him power."

"You mean that this person you're talking about-this person that Mrs. Greaves was supposed to have meddled with-you believe this person is the devil?"

Miss Johnson lowered her head. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but I do believe that in a manner of speaking."

Then Professor Qualt asked, 'Do you believe, as Mr. Greaves believed, that the jar contains an evil spirit? Is that it?'

Miss Johnson wouldn't look at him. She kept fiddling with her thumbnails, trying to pick off a rough edge.

"It's more than that, sir," she whispered. "I know what's inside that jar, and I know what I must do. I would rather, if you didn't mind, do it on my own."

"Did what on your own?" asked Anna. "Miss Johnson, you must understand that we know about the djinn, and we're here to help you."

Miss Johnson gave a lopsided smile. "I know you know," she said. "Otherwise you wouldn't have come around here with that pick, trying to break in. I've been watching you and listening to you ever since you arrived."

"But why the hell didn't you let us in?" I retorted. "I've just broken down a perfectly good door-all because of you."

In spite of my sore remarks, Miss Johnson remained cool and detached and dignified. I began to realize that, underneath those spectacles of hers, she really wasn't a bad-looking woman. It was only the plain old clothes she wore, her lack of makeup, her unplucked eyebrows, and her sensible shoes that made her look like a frump.

"Mr. Erskine," she said. "I have already told you that I know what's inside the jar, and that I know what I have to do about it. I can manage on my own. Anybody else will only get in my way."

"Please yourself," I said. "What is it you have to do?"

She kept her eyes down. "You may have heard the story of Ali Babah and the Forty Thieves," she said

quietly. "I mean, the real story, not that concoction they tell in the Arabian Nights. You may also know the story of the young princess who was abducted by Ali Babah to give to the tribe from whom he obtained the most evil of all djinns."

"The N'zwaa," said Anna softly.

"That's right," agreed Miss Johnson. "Well, I know you know these things, or you wouldn't be here. It is only those who know the true story of Ali Babah and the Forty Thieves who fear the Jar of the Djinn."

"But what's your involvement?" I asked her. "I thought you were nothing more than Marjorie's companion."

Miss Johnson nodded. "Officially," she said, "that is all I am, and all I ever will have been."

"And unofficially?"

She looked up. She took off her glasses, and my suspicions were confirmed. Although she had that odd near-sighted look that most people have when they doff their specs, she was really quite a reasonable-looking girl.

"Unofficially," she said, "I am a direct descendant of the Persian girl who tried to sacrifice her honor and her chastity for the sake of her sister's life. You know the legend, don't you? Of how the beautiful sister was going to be married, and how the plain sister offered her body to the djinn, for as long as she lived? Well, that plain sister, later in her life, long after her beautiful sister had been tortured to death, gave birth to a girl child, and that girl child married, and through hundreds of generations of girl children, the story has been handed down, and the same task given to each child."

"Task!" said Professor Qualt. "What task?"

Miss Johnson put back her spectacles. "We have been charged with finding the djinn of Ali Babah, wherever it may be, whenever it may come to light, and seeking our revenge on it."

"I don't understand," said Anna. "How was this done? I mean, how was this story passed on?"

Miss Johnson gave a slight shake of her head. "It was done in the same way that all stories and legends are passed down, by mothers speaking to their daughters. My grandmother, who was a Persian immigrant, told it to my mother, and my mother told it to me. She said that, whatever happened, I must pass it on to my own daughter; or, if I had no daughter, to my youngest female relative. This is entirely a woman's revenge, if you understand what I mean. It is a secret that has been closely guarded for a thousand years by women alone, in a way that men could never comprehend."

I pulled a face. "I'm just glad that I didn't upset your great-grandmother one hundred times removed."

Miss Johnson didn't smile. "Mr. Erskine, when you consider what that girl went through-what she had to sacrifice for the sake of her sister's life-only to find that her sister was killed anyway, then you will begin to realize that a thousand years is not too long a time to bear a grudge."

"What did she have to go through?" asked Professor Qualt. "Did your mother or your grandmother ever tell you?"

Miss Johnson looked away. "As far as the legends tell us, sir, it was sexual humiliation beyond any ever inflicted by a djinn. This djinn was evil beyond anyone's imagination, and the plain sister, according to what my mother told me, went through agonies and shame that far outdistanced anything that a human rapist could have inflicted on her."

"I see," said Anna.

Miss Johnson looked up. "You don't see," she said. "You don't even half-understand what it is to be entrusted with revenge that has been stored up for century after century like a sacred trust. Even though the djinn wasn't heard of, or seen, for hundreds of years, the women of my family never forgot what they had promised. That's why I have to do this thing by myself."

"How did you know the djinn was here," I asked. "How did you manage to get this job as Marjorie's companion?"

Miss Johnson shrugged. "It was part coincidence and part design. I knew that Mr. Greaves had the Jar of the Djinn in his collection. One of the main things that was passed down by my mother was how to recognize the djinn when he finally appeared. The djinn, she said, was secreted in a jar with blue poppy flowers and horses with no eyes."

"The horses of Nazwah the Unthinkable," said Anna softly.

"Some time ago, one of those decorating magazines published some pictures of Mr. Greaves's collection of Middle Eastern antiquities. They showed how he had blended them into his house, amongst his modern furniture. I saw it purely by chance. You can imagine what I felt when I saw the photograph of the Jar of the Djinn. I was sure that it was the right one. It was a color photograph, and I could see that the poppies were blue and that the horses had no eyes. It was after that article was published that I tried to find out more about Mr. Greaves. I discovered that his wife had been asking around for a companion, so I went to the local agency and signed on."

"Still," I said suspiciously, "that was no guarantee that Marjorie would employ you."

In the dancing light of the oil lamps. Miss Johnson looked embarrassed. "I did something I have never done in my life," she confessed. "I paid the agency a little bribe to recommend me."

Professor Qualt laughed. "You're a determined young lady, Miss Johnson," he said. "Does the Jar of the Djinn really mean that much to you?"

Miss Johnson was silent for a moment, then she said, "The Jar of the Djinn means everything to me, sir. I am not a pretty woman. I have never thought of getting married, and I don't suppose I ever shall. But at least I shall be able to accomplish one thing in my life, and that is the successful commission, after more than a thousand years, of one holy act of justified revenge. If only womankind had cradled more injustices and evil deeds against their bosoms for as long as this one, everything men have inflicted on us would have been avenged a thousand times over."

Anna sat up in her seat. "This is all very well, Miss Johnson, but what are you going to do?"

Miss Johnson blinked behind her glasses. "Do?" she said. "I don't understand."

"Well, how are you going to carry out this revenge? What are you going to do to the djinn? It's a very powerful spirit, you know. You're not just playing with Halloween pumpkins,"

Miss Johnson nodded. "I know that, Miss-"

"Modena," said Anna. "Anna Modena."

"I know that, Miss Modena," said Miss Johnson. "But among the instructions my mother gave me was a clear instruction on how to destroy the djinn."

Professor Qualt looked impressed. "Now we're getting someplace," he said. "Do you mind telling us what it is that one has to do to destroy a djinn?"

Miss Johnson fiddled nervously with the buttons of her rust-colored gown. "You must understand," she said, "that only / can destroy the djinn this way. It has to be done by someone who has a longstanding feud or grudge against the djinn. It will only work when someone against whom the djinn has done great wrong casts the sorcery."

"You mean, I couldn't do it myself?" asked Professor Qualt, "Because the djinn never did anything to me?"

"That's right," said Miss Johnson. "According to what my mother said, the spirits of the Middle East, like the ancient gods of Greece and Rome, have a scrupulous sense of revenge and justice. A life for a life. If you are seeking vengeance for a genuine wrong, then you will have the power of the greater gods on your side. If you are just interfering in something that is really none of your business, then you will just have to suffer the consequences."

I lit a cigarette and clicked my Zippo shut. "Is that a discreet warning?" I said.

Miss Johnson turned to me. "I am not given to warnings, Mr. Erskine. But I do wish that you would all leave me to deal with this djinn in my own way."

"After what it did to Max and to Marjorie? You're convinced that you can handle it?"

"Because I have a sacred mission, yes. All I have to do is bless a scimitar, according to the blessings of the old religions, which are all here in these books of Mr. Greaves, and then, with this scimitar, cut off one by one the forty heads of the djinn."

I took a long drag at my cigarette. "That's all you have to do?" I asked her, without much attempt to conceal my sarcasm.

"That's all," she said simply.

"You just find any old scimitar, and bless it, and start chopping?"

Miss Johnson was impervious to ridicule. She said quietly, "Mr. Greaves has a scimitar upstairs which used to belong to a holy man of the Nefud desert. I shall use that."

Professor Qualt stood up and walked over to the fireplace. In the flickering light, he looked saturnine and powerful. He crossed his meaty forearms and said; "Miss Johnson, if you're going to decapitate this djinn, then I presume you're going to have to let it out."

"Out?" she said nervously.

"That's right. Out of the jar. Now, how are you going to do that?"

Miss Johnson was twitchy, but she wasn't daunted. I have to give her that. The more she talked about her sacred and historic mission, the more I began to believe in it, even though I wasn't over-enthusiastic about women cradling their vengeance to their bosom for thousands of years. In my opinion, women inflict just as much shame and humiliation on men, and I don't see men bearing ill-will for centuries. Maybe Miss Johnson was a little unfriendly toward men, because she'd never had one.

Miss Johnson said quietly, "I'll break the seals on the door, then I'll open the jar with the appropriate words."

"And what if the djinn gets you before you get him? Or it?"

"I know what I'm doing," said Miss Johnson solemnly.

Professor Qualt looked equally solemn when he answered. "I'm quite sure you know what you're doing, Miss Johnson, but that doesn't answer my question. If you release the djinn, and you fail to destroy it, then God knows what kind of evil tornado you'll have let loose. And it will surely kill you, in a way that you won't particularly enjoy. I don't think there's much amusement in being the first modern lady to suffer one of the forty variations of ancient death."

"I can handle him," insisted Miss Johnson. "I know very well I can handle him."

"What about the night-clock?" Anna asked.

Miss Johnson didn't answer.

"Do you know about it?" Anna persisted. "You know what it is, don't you, and what it's used for?"

Miss Johnson nodded. "Yes," she said. "I know what the night-dock's for, I've been working it."

Professor Qualt shot an anxious glance across at me, and I shot a questioning look back.

"Working it?" said Qualt, his voice husky. "Why?"

"I have needed help and guidance," said Miss Johnson. "I used the night-clock to bring me-assistance."

"What kind of assistance?" I asked. "Men in hoods?"

Miss Johnson frowned. "What do you mean?" she asked, a little too frantically for comfort.

"Come on, Miss Johnson. I saw the guy myself.

The first time when you and Marjorie went out for a walk on the day of the funeral. The second time he was standing in the doorway behind you."

"I don't know," said Miss Johnson. "I don't know what you mean. There has never been anyone else here, apart from Mrs. Greaves and myself."

"I saw him, too," said Anna. "Quite tall, in a long robe, like a djellaba, with a hood."

Miss Johnson shook her head. "You must have imagined it. Perhaps it was just a shadow. I had my bathrobe in my arms when I was standing by the door. Perhaps you saw my bathrobe and imagined-

"Miss Johnson," I said gently, "I don't really think that we were mistaken. If there is someone else here, you'd better tell us."

There was a long silence. Then Miss Johnson said, "There's no one."

Professor Qualt was lighting up his pipe. Between puffs, he said in that deep, rich voice of his, "Do you know what was wrong with Mrs. Greaves?"

Miss Johnson shook her head again. "I wasn't aware that anything was,"

"But you said yourself that you weren't surprised she was dead. You said she meddled with things that she didn't understand, and that was why she was dead."

It was plain that Miss Johnson was growing distrustful of all of us, and that she was anxious to bring this interrogation to a close. But on our part, we were just as anxious to get to the truth. I may be imaginative enough to accept the existence of evil spirits in old jars and sundials that work in the dark, but my imagination has definite limits. One of the limits is that I believe what I see with my own eyes, and I believe what I hear with my own ears.

Miss Johnson sat up straight. "I think that the djinn may have contributed to Mrs. Greaves's death," she said flatly. "Its presence has made life in this house very-uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable?" I said. "If you ask me, it's made life goddamned hazardous!"

"Mrs. Greaves was under a terrible strain-particularly when Mr. Greaves committed suicide. She was extremely worried about the jar, because her late husband had always warned her not to go near it, and that was why she wanted to burn this whole place down."

"And you didn't agree with that?" asked Qualt. "I didn't think there was any need to," insisted Miss Johnson. "If you let me go up there-as I was going to do anyway-then I will open the jar and get rid of the djinn forever."

"You were going to do it tonight?" inquired Anna.

"Yes," said Miss Johnson. "In fact, it has to be tonight."

"Why?" said Qualt

Miss Johnson stood up and brushed her rust-colored gown. Despite her spectacles, she had an air about her which reminded me of a ritual priestess, or a nun in some ancient order.

"It has to be tonight because the influences of the stars are at their strongest tonight. I am using the night-clock to bring me strength, and tonight it will give me enormous power. Tonight I shall revenge a hundred generations of wronged women."

In the distance, we heard that plangent music again, stealing through the old corridors of Winter Sails with its endless, persistent, hair-raising modulations.

"It's tonight," said Miss Johnson, "You must not stop me."

While Miss Johnson went into the kitchen to make us all some hot coffee, Professor Qualt and Anna and I had a hurried and muttered conference. Professor Qualt was generally in favor of letting Miss Johnson tackle the djinn on her own. He felt she was aware of the risks and knew enough about charms and spiritual protections to keep her from danger. Anna, on the other hand, was stubbornly convinced that we ought to open the jar ourselves.

"Apart from anything else," she said, her dark eyes glittering in the lamplight, "the jar is absolutely priceless, and it belongs to the Iranians. Miss Johnson has only to drop the lid and break it, and it's ruined."

Professor Qualt said, "Anna, I'm just as concerned about the jar itself as you are. But don't you think we ought to get our priorities straight? If there was a ticking bomb inside a glass-fronted Louis XVI cabinet, you wouldn't hesitate to break the glass to get it out, would you?"

"I don't trust her," Anna said.

I stubbed out my cigarette. "That," I said, "is nearer to the truth."

"Well," Anna said hotly, "there's all the strange business about the hooded figure. She still hasn't answered that properly."

"She said there was no one else here," said Qualt.

"Yes, but we saw someone. I know we did. And it certainly wasn't a walking bathrobe."

Professor Qualt leaned back on the battered settee. "What do you think, Harry?"

I shrugged. "I think we ought to give her a try. After all, she seems to know what she's talking about. The only thing that bothers me is what happens if she fails to destroy it. I don't fancy one death, let alone forty."

"There are ways in which we can protect ourselves," said the professor. "You've seen how pentacles were used in Christianity to ward off Satan. Well, there were similar seals and signs in ancient Middle Eastern religions. One of the most powerful protections is the sign of the crescent moon, and we could draw one on the floor of this room to keep ourselves safe from the worst of it."

I looked at him with a somewhat old-fashioned expression. "It's not the worst of it I want to keep away from," I told him. "It's all of it"

Anna interrupted us. "I still don't think we should let her do it," she said persistently. "We don't know anything about her. We don't even know if this story of revenge is true. I mean, think about it. How can a story like that really get passed on for all those thousands of years from one woman to another? How many other stories do you know like that? There's something about Miss Johnson that makes me think she's-well, I don't know, I wouldn't say she's lying, but she's not telling the whole story."

I toyed absent-mindedly with a copper ashtray on the table by the settee. "What do you think she's leaving out?" I said, "And do you think it matters?"

Anna sighed. "I don't know, Harry. I simply believe that we ought to see this thing through ourselves, without Miss Johnson. There are all kinds of things about her that don't ring true. Like, why did she let your godmother go running out of here as if all the bats in hell were after her, and not do anything about it? And what's she doing with that night-clock? How does she know how to work it? Where did it come from? There are too many loose ends for my liking."

Professor Qualt looked from Anna to me and back again. "Well," he said, "I think the only way around

this one is to take a vote. AH those in favor of letting Miss Johnson do it her way, please raise your hands."

Professor Qualt and I both raised out hands.

"All those against."

"Oh, nuts," said Anna. "A democratic vote has nothing to do with it. I have a job to do, and that's to get that jar back to Iran-intact. I don't mind if it's opened, and the djinn is let out and destroyed. But I do mind if some bungling amateur is allowed to get her hands on it and risk smashing one of the world's finest examples of Iranian antique pottery. Those horses are the last remaining representation of the horses of Nazwah the Unthinkable in the entire world. How can we risk a ham-fisted old virgin like Miss Johnson touching a priceless relic like that?"

At that moment, Miss Johnson came in with a tray of steaming coffee and some assorted cookies. She had obviously heard what Anna was saying, because her face was grim and set as she poured the coffee.

"I'm sorry," said Anna. "I didn't mean to be rude. But-when I see amateurs getting their hands on genuine antiquities, my heart skips about two thousand beats."

Professor Qualt took his coffee from Miss Johnson and nodded. "I know what you mean, Anna. But I'm sure Miss Johnson will do everything she can to preserve the jar. Isn't that so, Miss Johnson?"

Miss Johnson looked icily at Anna. "According to Miss Modena, I have been able to preserve my chastity, so to preserve one antique jar more or less will be child's play."

I stirred my coffee studiously. The last thing I wanted right now was two women clawing at each other's throats, so I tried to bring the discussion to a speedy compromise.

"Listen," I said. "Supposing we let Miss Johnson tackle the djinn on her own, with the stipulation that we watch the proceedings, as observers, and step in when or if we have to?"

"Miss Johnson," said Professor Qualt. "That sounds like a reasonable suggestion to me."

Miss Johnson was obviously thrown off, but there wasn't much she could do except agree. I had more right to be in charge of that house than she did, and she knew it. What's more, it was more important to her to destroy the djinn than it was to have arguments of protocol which might delay and frustrate her ultimate act of vengeance. I may not be a psychiatrist, but I know what people lust for. In Miss Johnson's case, it was revenge and nothing else. At least I believed it was.

"All right," said Miss Johnson, "on one condition."

"No conditions," I ruled. "That's the deal. If you want to stay here and have a face-to-face with your historic enemy, then you have to do it on my terms."

"I was going to say, if things got out of hand--"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, supposing I can't destroy the djinn?"

Professor Qualt laughed. "If you can't succeed in destroying the djinn, Miss Johnson, I don't think you'll be in any position to impose your condition. If that happens, it's every man for himself. You can't legislate survival."

Miss Johnson looked unhappy. "No," she said, "I suppose not"

We sipped our coffee in silence. I can't remember if it was good coffee or bad. We just needed some excuse to retreat into ourselves and think about what was going to happen next. As I sipped, I was sure I could hear that strange monotonous music somewhere in the room, but every time I strained my ears to hear it better, it seemed to melt away into nothing at all. I looked at Anna, sitting tense and beautiful on the chair opposite, neatly and provocatively dressed in a cream-colored cotton shift; I looked at Professor Qualt, in his red-and-green striped shirt and his scruffy khaki pants; and I looked at Miss Johnson, in her severe rust gown and her glasses. Three strangers who had suddenly had their fates

inextricably intertwined with mine-and with the fate of the Jar of the Djinn.

It took us five or ten minutes to finish our coffee, but it seemed more like a half-hour. Finally, Miss Johnson stood up and said, "It's nearly midnight. That's the time when the star forces will be at their best. I must get everything ready. The scimitar, the spells, and the magic charms. Please wait here for a moment. I won't be long."

She went out into the hallway and closed the door behind her. I lit another cigarette and blew smoke toward the old plaster ceiling, watching it curl and rise in the lamplight. Anna sat rigid and wound-up, not making a move, and even Professor Qualt's nonchalance seemed tense and studied. There was an odd scurrying around, like a rat running along the wall behind the baseboard, that made me shudder.

We waited in silence for at least ten minutes. When it seemed as if a quarter of an hour had gone by, Professor Qualt looked at his watch. "It's half past twelve," he said. "I wonder what's holding her up?"

"Maybe she thought she ought to fix her face before she let the djinn out of his jar," Anna said sarcastically. "You never know. One good turn deserves another."

"Oh, bullshit," said Professor Qualt affably. "Harry, why don't you take a look out there and see if she's around."

"Okay," I said, heading for the hallway door. I tried it and it was locked. I rattled and banged, but there was no doubt that it was chained and bolted. I turned to Qualt and Anna, and their faces both registered the same doubt and alarm as mine.

"Try the dining room door," said Anna.

I walked quickly across the room and pushed against it. The dining room door was locked, too. And a quick inspection of the windows showed that every one of them was shuttered and securely closed with a security bolt. We were trapped-by what was conceivably the oldest trick in the world.

We stood together in the center of the room, listening. We could hear the squeak of floorboards upstairs and the occasional patter of mice or rats. The wind blew restlessly against the windows, rattling them

softly in their frames, as if someone was tapping quietly and urgently to come inside.

"My God," said Anna. "Supposing she lets out the djinn while we're still trapped in here."

Professor Qualt strode to the door and tried it for himself. Like every door in Winter Sails, it was made of solid seasoned pine, with brass hinges, and it would have taken a shoulder much burlier than Professor Qualt's to smash it down.

"Well, then," he said. "What can we do?"

"I don't know what we can do," I said, "except break a window. Do you want to have a try at that?"

"Wait," said Qualt. "Let's just see what happens first"

Anna was annoyed. "Happens!" she snapped. "We know damn well what's going to happen! She's going to let that djinn out of its jar, and if she fails to destroy it, she's going to appease it with us. I told you not to trust her. Why is it that men have no intuition about women's personalities at all?"

I lit a cigarette. "You mean she's going to offer us up as a sacrifice?"

Anna started pacing the floor like a wild tigress and nodded fiercely. "That's exactly what she's going to do. I just hope and pray that she knows what she's doing. And I hope and pray that she was telling the truth."

"About what in particular?" asked Qualt.

"About destroying the djinn, and all that stuff. For all we know, that's a pack of lies. Supposing she wants to release the djinn because she believes it's going to make her rich or pretty or famous, like djinns are supposed to do in fairy stories?"

I sat down on the settee and drew evenly at ray cigarette. "Supposing none of it's true? Supposing there isn't a djinn or a jar or anything, and we're all being taken for a ride?"

"Oh, come on now, Harry," said Professor Qualt "A practical joke is a practical joke, but this whole situation has gone too far."

I stared at him glumly. "I guess you're right," I said. "If this is a practical joke, what's the punch line?"

Anna meanwhile was rummaging industriously in the magazine rack. It was mainly stuffed with yellowed, out-of-date newspapers, all mutilated by Max Greaves's censorial scissors. She tugged out one of two magazines, and then finally said, "Here it is!"

She was holding up a new copy of Time magazine. It was noticeable because it hadn't had its cover torn off and its pictures snipped out. It must have been the copy that the kid had delivered that afternoon, the copy that had made Professor Qualt believe that the djinn was on the verge of breaking loose.

"Put it here," said Professor Qualt, and Anna spread the crumpled magazine on the table. He flicked quickly through page after page, checking every photograph for a missing face or a mysterious blank. When he reached the obituaries, he stopped and pointed. "There," he said.

One of the photographs on the page had been neatly cut out. Underneath the gap was a caption that read: Max Greaves in oil-boom days. Qualt shut the magazine thoughtfully and sat down.

"What is it?" I said. "What does it mean?"

Qualt looked up. "It means simply this," he explained. "Miss Johnson has taken the face of Max Greaves out of Time magazine to give to the djinn, The djinn's master form, when he is triumphantly resurrected from his jar, will be Max Greaves. The devil may have been cheated of Max's face once, but Miss Johnson has made absolutely sure that he won't escape again."

As he spoke these words, I became aware of a strange stillness in the room. One of the oil lamps sputtered and went out. Then another one flickered and died. Soon we were standing in shadowy

dimness, and before long, the last lamp was ebbing away, and the gloom gathered in on us from all sides.

In the darkness, Anna reached out and held my hand. Qualt said unsteadily, "Can you light your lighter, Harry? I think I left mine on the mantelpiece. Harry, I think there's something-"

We held our breath and listened. At first I couldn't be sure if I could hear anything at all. But somehow, over the soft coughing of the sea breeze and the settling creaks of Winter Sails, I was sure that I could hear something inside the room. Something that clung in the shadows. Something that flapped, as if on scaly wings . . .

Chapter 7

I struck my Zippo and turned the flame up high. There was a fluttering, flickering sound, like a bat beating against a bedroom curtain. I looked quickly and nervously around the long drawing room, holding the cigarette lighter up as high as I could, but the shadows were too deep and crowded with movement, and it was impossible to see if there was anything alive in the room or not. It wasn't long before the lighter grew too hot to hold, and I had to blow it out and stand in the dark holding Anna's hand, listening and waiting for the slightest noise or flapping of strange wings.

"What is it?" whispered Anna in a taut, dry yoke.

"Sssshhh," said Qualt. "I don't know what it is. A powerful djinn can create any kind of monster it wishes."

"Does that mean the djinn's free?" I said intensely. "Qualt, does that mean she's let him out of the jar?"

"Please, don't talk so loud! It's in this room someplace! No, it doesn't mean that the djinn is free. It could be, but I doubt it. This is some kind of creature that Miss Johnson has summoned with the help of the night-clock. This is what she meant when she said she had called for assistance. It's some kind of beast or spirit that will help her free Ali Babah's djinn without interference. A guard dog, if you see what I mean, from the spirit world."

Again, I heard a creepy fluttering. "Some guard dog," I whispered. My heart felt as if it were bound with elastic, and my face was covered in chilly sweat. Anna was holding my hand so tight that her fingernails were digging into my palms.

"There!" gasped Anna. "It's over there by the fireplace!"

I flicked my lighter again and held it up. I saw something. I was sure I saw something. But I didn't see enough to make out what it was. If it was like anything at all, it was like an oddly deformed child, crouching next to the fireplace amongst the shadows. It stirred with that same dry flapping sound, and in nervous response I threw my flaming lighter toward it. The lighter clattered down, and the thing twisted off into the shadows.

"Out!" shouted Professor Qualt. "We have to get out of here!"

He barged through the darkness and pushed us both toward the windows. I banged my shin on the side of a chair and knocked it over, and I felt Anna stumble on the loose and tatty rug, but we made it across the room. The flapping sound was more frantic now, and I could almost feel something clawing and touching at my face and clothes. I beat my hand toward it, but there was nothing there at all.

"Support me!" Qualt ordered.

I stood with my back to the window, and he rested his back against mine and kicked hard against the glass. There was a ringing, splintering noise, and the glass dropped out. Then he kicked again, very hard, four or five times, and the latch on the shutters snapped. The wooden shutters swung open, and we felt the steady cool breeze from the sea.

"Anna!" I shouted, grabbing her hand. We climbed onto the splintered glass on the windowsill and jumped out into the darkness. We landed in the soft, grass-tufted sand and rolled over a couple of times.

Qualt was shouting at the top of his voice as he leaped out of the window. In the darkness, I thought I saw something pale clinging to his shoulders. He fell heavily and went over two or three times before coming to rest at the foot of the slope below the drawing room windows. I pulled myself upright and slid across the sand toward him.

"Qualt!" I said. "Are you all right?"

"Only just," he panted. I could see the sweat on his forehead glistening in the moonlight. I helped him to sit up, and he felt his ankles to see if either of them was sprained.

"I thought I saw something," said Anna. "On your back, as you jumped out of the window."

"You did," said Qualt, "And look what saved me." He pointed into the sky. We peered around, but we were none the wiser. There were clouds, a few stars, some distant trees. "The moon," said Qualt quietly. "Tonight, there's a beautiful crescent moon. The crescent is the magical shape that dismisses evil, and the moon dismissed that thing as soon as it shone on it."

Anna shuddered. "You mean if it hadn't been a crescent moon, you would have-"

Qualt climbed clumsily to his feet "I don't know," he said. "I don't know what that thing was, and I hope I never find out. It had claws or sharp little fingers. It was digging itself into my neck, and I thought it was going to choke me. Just don't ask. As long as the spirits are on my side just some of the time, that's enough for me."

We skated slowly through the sand down toward the beach. From here, on the moon-silvered shore, we had a good view of the Gothic turret on the seaward side of Winter Sails. The moonlight turned its windows into blind squares, and we could see nothing inside it at all, but there was a dim orange light further along the house, in one of the upstairs windows, and that probably meant that Miss Johnson was still preparing for her grand act of occult vengeance.

"She's blessing the scimitar, I expect," said Professor Qualt. "I know those old Persian blessing ceremonies, and they're usually pretty lengthy and elaborate. If we hurry, we should be able to get back into the house before she starts."

"Get back?" I said distastefully. "We've only just managed to get ourselves out!"

Anna took my hand. "Harry," she said, "we must get inside there. We must stop Miss Johnson from opening that jar herself. She thinks she knows what she's doing, but she doesn't know half of it. Please, I need your help."

I sighed. She was very beautiful, and the sea breeze was blowing her dark hair in a particularly attractive way. She was breathing deeply after our struggle in the drawing room, and her large breasts rose and fell in the kind of distinctive rhythm which I've always found hard to ignore. Apart from that, I objected to being locked up in my own godparents' house by a frustrated spinster with protruding teeth, and I began to feel that I wanted some revenge of my own. Above us, the weathervane squeaked plaintively on the Gothic cupola, and the wind blew sadly along the broken tiles and gutters of Winter Sails.

"All right," I said. "If we're going, let's go."

We skirted the seaward side of Winter Sails and climbed up onto the main lawn. The dry grass swished against our legs as we made our way through it, and every cricket and mouse that rustled in the grass made my hair prickle and my heart pound harder. A dark smudge of cloud rolled across the moon, and the lawn grew even gloomier. The house itself kept its strange bonelike radiance, like all old houses do when their timbers are parched by the sun and the sea.

We had been walking so close to the side of the house that, at first, we didn't look out across the lawn toward the sundial. But as we neared the steps that led down to the gravel driveway, Professor Qualt suddenly reached forward and held me by the arm. "Look," he whispered. "The night-clock."

I turned and I actually jumped in nervous shock. Across the cloud-shadowed grass, by the white stone pillar of the sundial, a tall figure was standing, hunched over the Arabian night-clock with deep concentration. The figure was dressed in a long hooded robe. The hood was so voluminous that, inside it, I could see nothing but darkness.

"Oh my God," said Anna. "It actually exists. It's here. Oh my God."

"Why doesn't it do anything?" I whispered to Qualt. "It doesn't even seem to have seen us."

Qualt strained his eyes in the darkness. "It's working the night-clock," he said. "When you're working the night-clock, no earthly considerations will ever worry you. You see what it's doing? It's bringing power down from the stars, from the great beyond out there, and it's directing all that power toward the turret. It's the power that Ali Babah's djinn will need to revive itself."

"Then we have to stop it," I said bluntly. "I don't mind a weak djinn, but I don't want to face a powerful one. Do you?"

I wouldn't say I wasn't scared, but sometimes it's worth facing up to a lesser fright in order to save yourself a bigger one. I started to run across the lawn toward the tall hooded figure, puffing and panting and praying to God that it wasn't too monstrous, that it wasn't too powerful, and that it wasn't going to strike me down as I ran.

At first, the figure didn't seem to notice me. But then Qualt came running up behind me, and the figure lifted its hooded head and regarded us with its impenetrable, shadowy face. For some reason-sheer terror, I suppose-I started to yell and shout at it, waving my arms as I ran.

The figure paused for a while, then it began to glide away from us, away across the lawn toward the trees. By the time we had both reached the night-clock, it had disappeared into the darkness.

We stood still for a while, catching our breath. I'm a clairvoyant, not an Olympic athlete, and that eighty-yard run had just about scorched my lungs. Qualt was not much fitter, and he was coughing and panting and probably wishing that he'd never smoked a pipe in his life. Anna came up after us, looking pale and uncertain in the murky moonlight.

"Did you see what it was?" she said softly.

I shook my head, still panting. "It was too dark, and that hood completely covers its face."

"It was my fault," said Professor Qualt. "If you'd gone on your own, it probably wouldn't have noticed you until you were right up to it."

I breathed in deep, even gulps of air. "Don't blame yourself for that," I told him. "The last thing I wanted to do was actually catch up with it."

Qualt went over to the night-clock and examined it. He beckoned me over, and I stared down at the strange Arabic dial with its occult numerals and peculiar engravings of animals and men-beasts.

It seemed to be glowing, all along its engraved lines, with a radioactive fluorescence, and when I held the sides of the sundial, the stone itself seemed to be warm.

"The spiritual energy flowing through here is enormous," said Qualt. "I never thought I'd see one of these, let alone see one working. All the power of the zodiac is concentrated through here, like a kind of spiritual laser beam. I should say that, atomic bombs aside, this is the most powerful single instrument in the world today."

I looked at it closely. "Is it still running?" I asked. "I mean, is it still giving power to the djinn?"

"Not now," said Qualt. "It needs its operator- our friend in the hood-before it's able to work. At the moment, it's just idling and all its strength is being dissipated."

"Can we put it out of action?" I asked. "Sabotage it?"

Qualt looked at Anna. "What do you think?" he said. "From what I know of night-clocks, we ought to leave it alone."

Anna nodded. "Until we know if there's anyone tied up with the night-clock's influence, we daren't. Miss Johnson might be under its power, for all we know. In fact, she probably is. That hooded figure, whatever it is, might be tied up with it, too. If we destroyed the night-clock now, we might be condemning both of them to a fate that we can't even think about."

"I agree," said Qualt. "The best we can do now is get inside the house and stop Miss Johnson from opening the jar on her own. I think we've frightened our hooded friend off for a while, anyway."

I coughed. "We've frightened him off? You have to be kidding."

"Come on," said Qualt. "I don't suppose we have a great deal of time to spare."

Walking quickly, we left the night-clock and made our way toward the house. We crossed the gravel driveway and approached the porch. The door was still hanging off its hinges, and, very cautiously, we stepped over it and into the black-and-white tiled hall. The hall and the stairway were very dark and thick with shadows, and I noticed a curious odor in the air, like incense or burning flowers.

Qualt lifted his head and sniffed. "That smells like poppy incense," he said quietly. "I think Miss Johnson must be almost ready to open the jar."

"Poppy incense?" I questioned.

"That's right," said Anna. "In the blessing of the scimitar, the last act is to cleanse the blade of impurities by passing it through the smoke of dried POPPY petals, mixed with opium paste."

I peered up the staircase into the gloom of the second floor. "Just so long as Miss Johnson doesn't decide to cleanse her sword of impurities by sticking it in me," I said, "I don't mind."

Anna shivered. "Don't say things like that," she said. "I'm frightened enough as it is."

With Professor Qualt leading the way, we stepped quietly across the hall toward the stairs. Very faintly, we could hear the monotonous, tingling music of the djinn, wheedling and whining in the background. Because the moon was concealed behind the clouds, it was impossibly dark on the staircase, and we had to make our way up by feel. Several times, we knocked our feet against the old wooden risers, and we froze, listening for footsteps, or for that dreadful flapping.

At last we made it to the top and stood together at the end of the corridor. The clouds were obviously passing, because some stray rays of diffused moonlight were beginning to fall through the open doorways on either side of the corridor. It was the very end of the corridor that caught our attention, however. From the left-hand side of the T-shape, we could see the unsteady orange radiance of an oil lamp. Miss Johnson was already at the djinn's door, preparing to break open the seals and the locks.

"Quick," said Professor Qualt. Keeping close together and treading as softly as we could, we hurried down to the end of the corridor and turned the corner.

Miss Johnson, in her long rust-colored robes, and now wearing a headdress like a silver-link wig, was standing in front of the turret door. In one hand she held a long gleaming scimitar, heavily engraved with runes and flower patterns. In the other, she held a small copper incense burner, dull with age, from which clouds of scented blue smoke were puffing.

"Is that you?" she said in a flat voice. Professor Qualt frowned and looked at both of us. Then he said, "Yes, it is I."

Miss Johnson didn't turn around, didn't even check to see who it was. It occurred to me then that she was in a trance, a deep and hypnotic trance, and that she thought we were someone else altogether. Perhaps she had been expecting the arrival of her hooded friend in the robes. Whatever it was, she kept on swinging her incense and making elaborate patterns in the air with her shining sword.

I whispered in Quail's hairy ear, "What do we do now? Do we rush her?"

Qualt whispered back, "No need. She knows what she's doing. It's just up to us to make sure she does it properly. If she fails to destroy the djinn, then maybe we can carry on where she leaves off."

"I don't fancy my chances," I said. "I only took three lessons in ju-jitsu."

Anna said, "Ju-jitsu won't help with the djinn of Ali Babah, Harry. Now watch, look what she's doing!"

Miss Johnson was shivering and shaking. She kept leaning forward and tossing her head from side to side, and from where we were standing at the corner of the corridor, we could see that her tongue was lolling out from between her lips, and that her eyes were rolled up into her head so that only the gleaming whites were showing. Her face was almost blue from opium smoking, and there was foam running down her chin. She sliced the scimitar around in the air so violently that I was afraid she was going to cut herself. Those ancient swords are sharp enough to cut through single hairs that are floating in the air.

She began to chant and whimper and stamp her feet on the floor. She called the name of Nazwah several times, although I couldn't understand the rest of the incantation. Then she traced her finger around the brown sealing wax that kept the djinn imprisoned inside the turret, and over the impressions and patterns and ribbons.

An extraordinary thing happened. As her finger ran around the outside edge of the door, the wax melted and slid down the paneling in long brown drips. The sacred seals and symbols dissolved into shapeless globs, and the powerful triangles and figures that had kept the djinn of Ali Babah safely locked within the Gothic turret began to disappear. I felt distinctly nervous when I saw them vanish like that, and I kept a frequent lookout over my shoulder to make sure that my exit down the corridor was clear. If Miss Johnson had been expecting someone else, I didn't want to have them in back of me when the djinn was released from his ancient prison.

Miss Johnson was trembling now like a crane fly on a summer porch. She swung the censer until the corridor was blue with poppy smoke, and she flashed the scimitar in wilder and wilder patterns. The sides of the turret door were now clear of wax, and all the seals were gone. Only the thick metal bar remained between Miss Johnson and the djinn she sought to destroy.

"How's she going to do it?" I whispered. "How's she going to break her way through that?"

Anna, pressed against me, said, "Ssssh."

Miss Johnson was reciting some long and tedious Arabic spell. Her voice was a guttural, choking mumble, and she kept jerking and shaking as she spoke. But finally the spell appeared to be complete. She touched the point of the scimitar against the center of the iron bar and called again on Nazwah the Unthinkable.

That solid iron bar snapped. I swear it-I saw it happen. Miss Johnson spoke the name of Nazwah and the iron bar broke in the middle like a stick of caramel. The pieces dropped heavily to the floor, and the door to the turret was clear of locks.

"Well," breathed Professor Qualt, "here we go."

Miss Johnson stepped forward and turned the doorknob. She had to push hard against the solid pine, but finally the door shuddered and creaked and opened. I tried to see past Miss Johnson into the turret itself, but there was too much incense smoke to see clearly.

Miss Johnson, her head erect, her step measured, entered the turret. For a brief moment I saw, through the moonlight that fell into the turret on three sides, the tall smooth shape of the Jar of the Djinn itself, with its patterns of blue poppies and horses without eyes. It seemed to have grown in size from the jar I remembered as a boy. It was cold, gleaming porcelain; silent and sinister. Then Miss Johnson closed the turret door behind her, and I saw no more.

"What do we do now?" hissed Anna,

Professor Qualt stepped gingerly up to the door and put his ear to it.

"I think we wait," he said. "If we open the door and rush in now, we might ruin the whole thing. Miss Johnson seems to have everything under control."

I checked the corridor behind us. "I just hope it doesn't take too long," I said. "My nerves are stretched out like elastic bands."

Professor Qualt looked at me gravely. "She's starting her incantations now. It can't be long. Five minutes at the most."

"Oh, God," said Anna softly.

At first, from where I was standing, I couldn't hear anything. But then, through the turret door, I heard again the whining Arabic music, and a thin voice that seemed to be singing with it. It reminded me of muezzins calling from mosques. Painful and sacred, and full of invocations to the ghosts and the spirits and the demons who crowd the night. I became aware of something else, too—the beginnings of a soft, pulse like rhythm that vibrated through the old woodwork of Winter Sails, a rhythm that was felt rather than heard.

The music grew increasingly frantic, and there seemed to be two or even three voices singing with it. I could hear Miss Johnson calling and reciting spells at the top of her voice, and fitful lights began to flicker through the crack under the door.

I was so tensed up, so engrossed, that I forgot to check the corridor behind me. The strange invocations went on and on, the pulse like rhythm beat faster with it, and I found my attention drawn hypnotically to the weird lights that shone from beneath the door, I didn't know what a djinn was supposed to look like and I didn't even understand what it was supposed to do, but the blatant fear and anxiety that Anna and Professor Qualt and Max Greaves had shown for this evil manifestation were enough to convince me that, whatever happened, it had to be destroyed.

For a moment, the music seemed to fade. The pulse kept on, but Miss Johnson seemed to have completed the first part of her long incantation, and there was a whispery hush inside the turret that was almost as creepy as the sound of the sorcerous spells.

I turned around to look down the corridor, and I went cold. Halfway down it, moving slowly toward me, was the hooded figure. It was bathed in a blurry glow of moonlight, its face hidden in inky darkness.

"Professor." I said quietly. "It's arrived."

Qualt stepped away from the turret door and looked down the corridor. He licked his lips, which seemed to have suddenly gone dry. I heard him swallow. The hooded figure remained where it was, silent and forbidding, a mournful phantom from the night's dark rim.

Qualt, in a strained voice, called out to it. "What are you?" he said. "What do you want?"

The hooded figure didn't answer. It simply stood in the silvery moonlight, unmoving, faceless, and quiet. For all I could see, it could have been nothing more than a robe and a hood, gliding along the corridors of Winter Sails of their own volition.

Professor Qualt took a step toward the figure, but still it didn't move.

"Professor," whispered Anna. "For God's sake, remember what happened in the drawing room."

Qualt said nothing but took another step toward the figure. It remained where it was. A slight draft blew its robes around its invisible feet, and the hood seemed to shiver.

Qualt kept walking, step by step, until he was only a few feet away from the hooded figure. Then he said dryly, "What do you want?"

The figure started to turn away, but Professor Qualt said, "I know who you are, you know," and it paused and stopped.

"The jar is nearly open," said Professor Qualt. "You can't afford to miss that, can you?"

The figure remained silent. Professor Qualt walked right up to it, only inches away, and peered into the hood.

Then, the figure spoke. Its voice was croaky, painful, and infinitely weary. It sounded like a voice from a sepulchre, a voice that had experienced more doom and misery than any normal being could ever know. It was oddly distorted, too, as if the figure were speaking in an unseen wind.

"You know?" it said simply. "Well, if you know, then you must know what this means to me."

"You want me to let you pass?" asked Professor Qualt. "Is that what you're asking?"

"I have to pass," said the hooded figure. "Unless I pass, I am cursed forever."

"I won't let you," said Qualt. "You know as well as I do how wrong this is."

The hooded figure lowered its head. "Who are you to speak to me of wrong?" it said. "What do you know of wrong? What do you know of ancient evil and the power that it holds over all those who have been weighted down with its sorrow? What do you know about anything?"

Professor Qualt didn't budge. "I may not know much," he said calmly, "but I know who you are, and I know what you're trying to do."

The hooded figure was silent for a moment. Inside the turret, I could sense even more insistently the pulse of the reviving djinn. Through the thick pine door, Miss Johnson's voice and other strange voices came echoing into the corridor. There wasn't much time left, and we all knew it.

"Do you hear that?" asked Professor Qualt. "In a few minutes, the djinn will be let loose. She doesn't even realize you're not there. She doesn't even know that it's all going to go catastrophically wrong."

"What do you want me to do?" the figure said.

Professor Qualt turned around and pointed to the turret door. "I want you to do what you should have done all along. I want you to exorcize that djinn. I want you to seal him up for all eternity and cast him away where he can't work his evil on other people, the way that he did on you."

The hooded figure spoke again in its whispery, broken voice. "Do you think I didn't try, you fool? Do you think I didn't try to get rid of it? But once that djinn had a lust for freedom, it was too late! I wasn't strong enough! I'm still not. It's only she who has what the djinn really wants!"

Then the figure raised its arm and cast back its hood. In the chilling light of the crescent moon, I saw the hideously butchered face of my godfather, Max Greaves. He only showed it for a moment, then dropped the concealing hood back again and was once more drowned in darkness.

"Max," I said softly. "Max, what's going on?"

The hooded figure didn't answer but stood there as before, unmoving and ethereal.

I left Anna's side and joined Professor Qualt. Even though I could see nothing but blackness inside Max's hood, I still had a sickening mental picture of what he had done to his face.

"Max," I said. "You recognize me, don't you? It's Harry!"

The figure nodded. "I know," said Max Greaves hoarsely, in that distorted graveyard voice. "I know it's you, Harry."

"Max, we thought you were dead. We went to your funeral."

Max sighed, an odd-sounding noise that was more like a dog than a man. "You were supposed to think I was dead," he said softly. "Everyone was supposed to think that, except for those who knew."

"But why?" said Professor Qualt. "What was it all for?"

There was renewed chanting from the turret room and a strange noise like hundreds of people whispering at once. The pulse was stronger and more pronounced now, and it throbbed through the house as if the very substance of the building were coming to life. I heard rats running in panic through the rafters.

Anna called out, "Hurry, it can't be long now!" Max took a tentative step toward us. "You must let me through," he said urgently. "I mustn't miss it, whatever happens."

Professor Qualt blocked his way. "First," he said harshly, "you must tell us what happened. Quickly now, if you want to keep your appointment with Miss Johnson."

Max swayed his hooded head from side to side in desperation. "There's too much to tell," he said. "You must let me pass. For the love of everything holy, let me pass!"

"Max," I said coaxingly. "All you have to do is tell us what happened."

"There's too much! I can't! Let me pass, Harry! I'm your own godfather, Harry! I took vows to keep and protect you! Please Harry, let me pass!"

For a moment, hearing that distorted, beseeching voice—a voice so different from the Max I knew, and yet still so familiar—I felt tempted to give way. But Professor Qualt sensed my wavering and held my arm. "We must know," he reassured me in his deep, rich voice. "He must tell us, or we'll all be damned."

Again, like a rustling tide, the sound of whispering rose and fell in the turret room. The Forty Thieves, I thought to myself. Forty variations of death, each one more agonizing and unbearable than the last. Above the whispering, I could hear the staccato voice of Miss Johnson, casting her Arabic spells over the Jar of the Djinn with unceasing stridency.

Max lowered his hooded head and said, "All right, if that is the only way. We have a few minutes yet, by the sound of it. But if I tell you everything, you must agree to let me pass. You must."

"Come and sit down," said Professor Qualt blandly, ushering the hooded figure into the study that had been the center of Max Greaves's life and work. Max stood in the gloomiest corner, while Qualt sat down in the big wooden chair by the desk, and I propped myself on the edge of the desk beside him. Anna came to the door to listen, but she kept a sharp eye on the corner of the corridor.

"I think you had better try and tell us what happened, right from the very beginning," said Professor Qualt. "You knew what the jar was when you bought it, didn't you?"

"Yes," whispered Max, "I did. I was told of its existence by a Persian black marketeer when I was working on a drilling project. I thought little of it at first. Rich white men are always being offered worthless Middle Eastern antiquities when they travel abroad. But I took the trouble to go to the library in Bagdad when I was there, and I found a book on the story behind Ali Babah and the Forty Thieves. From then on, I was hooked by the whole idea of it. I went back to the black marketeer and I arranged to buy the jar. It was-and still is-one of the finest antiques I possess."

Professor Qualt coughed. "But it was the djinn you wanted, rather than just the jar, wasn't it?"

The hooded figure was silent for a while. Then he said, "It says in the legend that the Forty Thieves, if properly appeased, is one of the most powerful and loyal of all ancient djinns. It can make a man rich beyond his dreams, successful out of all imagination, handsome, cultured, and attractive to women."

I said, scarcely believing it, "Max-you wanted all that? You wanted to be rich and attractive and all of that stuff? With the help of an evil spirit?"

The hooded figure turned my way. "Harry," he said, "it is difficult for you to judge. The offer was never made to you. The possibility was never within your grasp. But when you suddenly realize that wealth is within your reach-untold wealth, fabulous wealth, fairy-tale wealth-then you begin to think differently. Perhaps, you even go a little mad. I don't know. But I wanted wealth and I wanted success. I wanted it even more when my oil business began to go bust. I thought that the djinn could give it to me."

As he spoke, the room began to pulse with the low, sinister rhythm of the emerging spirit. The whispering had never stopped, but now it seemed more threatening than ever.

"We have to hurry," said Professor Qualt. "Tell us more, Mr. Greaves. Tell us when you decided to raise the djinn from its prison."

"I tried many times, over the years," said Max Greaves. "I used all the right ancient incantations, and all the right spells, but somehow it never worked. The jar remained dormant. Silent. In the end, I gave up trying and left it around as an ornament. I expect Harry remembers when it used to stand in the hall."

I nodded. "I remember. I always used to like the horses on it."

"Then," said Max, "I read about night-clocks. That was the key to my problem. The djinn of Ali Babah had been sent to sleep in its jar for a million years and only the astrological power of a night-clock could possibly revive it. I searched for a night-clock for several years. In the end, I spent three-quarters-of-a-million dollars buying one, on the black market, in the Soviet Union. I had great trouble getting it out of the country, but untold wealth is a considerable incentive."

"Go on," said Professor Qualt, keeping half an ear open for the rustling sound of the djinn's whispers.

"I awoke the djinn," said Max Greaves. "I set up the night-clock on the sundial plinth and aligned it, and after several attempts, I awoke it. I was sitting in my study reading one evening when I heard a sort of scratching noise. I went outside to see if it was a rat in the corridor, or maybe someone trying to get in. It was only when I went back into the study, where I used to keep the jar in those days, that I realized what it was. My incantations and my use of the night-dock had stirred it out of its million-year slumber. I listened to it scratching all night, and I was very excited."

"And then? What went wrong?" I asked him. "Marjorie told me you were sick and had migraines."

"It was the djinn," whispered Max. "It was far more powerful than I first thought. Soon after it awoke, I began to have terrible nightmares in which I was dying in all kinds of bizarre and horrible ways. I had persistent headaches, and I lost my appetite. At night, I used to hear the djinn singing to itself inside its jar, and I knew what it was singing about. It would soon be free!"

Professor Qualt said, "Couldn't you have destroyed it then? Or gotten rid of it? While it was still inside its jar?"

"I didn't want to," answered Max. "I still believed that I could control it and find a way to make it my slave. But as the nightmares got worse, and my health began to suffer, I knew that I would have to seal it away, imprison it, until I knew more about it and how to make sure it didn't destroy me. That's why I sealed it in the turret and took the precaution of removing every face in the whole house."

"Every face," I said quietly, "except your own."

The hooded figure was silent again. He left it up to us to imagine the night when the influence of the

malevolent djinn began to reach out to him and demand the very features from his face. And we had seen for ourselves the hacked-up cheeks and the awful cavity of the nose, and we knew what he had sacrificed to prevent the djinn from leaving its jar and acquiring a master form.

"After that night," said Max quietly, "for the sake of my family and myself, I pretended to die. Dr. Jarvis helped me, and for a while, he managed to conceal the fact that I was still alive from Marjorie. But when Marjorie gave you permission to break into the turret and remove the jar, well, we had to tell her everything. That's why she sent you out of the house so abruptly, Harry. She had just been told that I was still alive, and that I needed the djinn to restore my face."

"And Miss Johnson?" said Professor Qualt. "I presume that she knew what was going on?"

Max lowered his hooded head. "Miss Johnson made herself known to me the moment she arrived here. Marjorie never knew that she was anything except a companion. But after that night-the night I had to cut off my face-Miss Johnson told me that she could help me tame the djinn. She said that as long as I asked for nothing more than the repair of my face-as long as I didn't expect riches or wealth or success-then she would raise up the djinn for me. Well, I was glad to accept. I am still suffering more pain than you could ever imagine."

"Max," I said, "Miss Johnson is going to destroy the djinn. Didn't you know that?"

Max looked in my direction. A faint gleam of moonlight shone in his mutilated eye.

"Oh, no," he said huskily. "That's quite impossible. Miss Johnson said she wanted the djinn for her own purposes. She would never destroy it."

"What?" said Professor Qualt. "What do you mean, her own purposes?"

"I don't know," replied Max. "The deal was that I got my face back, and let her use all my Arabic magic books and robes and swords in return. She has a picture of my face in there, and she's going to get the djinn to restore it to me. That's the deal. That's what we agreed,"

Professor Qualt stood up. His face was white. "You mean, she's going to let the djinn stay alive?"

"Of course," said Max. "That's the deal."

Qualt raised his head and listened. From the turret room we could hear the gathering whispers and a high-pitched wailing from Miss Johnson that sounded like the climax of a long and complex incantation. The thick pulse beat throbbed through the house, and there was a dense miasma of evil in the air.

"She's deceived us all," whispered Qualt. "She has no intention of restoring your face, Mr. Greaves. She simply wanted to use all your knowledge and all your books and magic artifacts. She wanted your picture for its master form. She wants to raise the djinn out of its jar and use it for-well, God only knows what she wants to use it for."

Suddenly, from the corridor, Anna said, "Hurry! Hurry, Professor. Something's happening!"

Chapter 8

From the inside of the Gothic turret, we heard booming voices, harsh and guttural and cruel, so loud that

they seemed to be amplified. They were speaking in the same strange tongue that Marjorie Greaves had spoken before she died. They were menacing and grotesque, like a groaning chorus of demons, and for the first time I felt so frightened that I could hardly move my arms or legs, or even speak.

"Open the door," said Max Greaves, who was dose behind us. "Whatever happens, you must open the door."

"Open it?" questioned Professor Qualt. "But what if the djinn is out of its jar?"

"Open it," repeated Max dully. "It's the only way."

Professor Qualt looked at me, biting his lip nervously. Then he moved toward the door, his hands raised in front of him as if he were crossing an unfamiliar room in the dark. I edged forward, too, and we stood side by side in front of the solid pine, trying to convince ourselves that we were brave enough to face whatever was behind it. Anna was right behind us, looking strained but determined.

There was another burst of loud, guttural speech, and then a thin, urgent voice that sounded like Miss Johnson. Professor Qualt said, "Here we go," and raised his leg to kick at the door.

Before he could move, there was a terrifying noise like a thousand pairs of snapping scissors, and the air was filled with a blizzard of razor-sharp blades. Qualt threw himself one way and I threw myself the other, our hands covering our faces. The cloud sliced past us and vanished.

Max had thrown himself to the floor, too, pulling Anna down with him.

"What was that?" said Qualt "What the hell was that?"

Max raised his hooded head. "The knife-storm, they call it in the Sudan. A little magical ambush for the unwary, that's all. Be careful there may be more."

We climbed cautiously to our feet and stood by the door again. "Are you ready?" said Qualt, looking me

steadily in the eye. I don't suppose he saw anything there but sheer fright, but I gave him a sick little grin of encouragement, and he reached out for the handle.

With a quick shove. Professor Qualt pushed the door of the turret inward. It swung back as if someone were opening it from the inside and inviting us in.

It was the intense heat that hit us first. It roiled out of the open door in shuddering waves, dry and baking like the heat of the desert. The only time I had ever experienced heat like that before was out in Nevada, at midday, when your own shadow hides under your feet for protection. Inside the turret, it must have been 110 and rising.

But it was not the heat that horrified us. Shielding our eyes against it, we saw Miss Johnson in her silver wig and her rust-colored robes, standing in the center of the room with her legs apart and her arms raised. She still held the scimitar and the smoking censer, and the room was dense with smoke. Her face seemed to be dragged upward in a wolfish mask, as if she were standing in a cyclone.

In front of her, the Jar of the Djinn was now unsealed. It was a tall jar, as tall as my chest, and it was decorated in blues and pale greens and subtle pinks. Out of its open neck, on an impossibly thin stem, rose the head of Max Greaves, its face uplifted toward Miss Johnson. It was this head that was speaking to her in deep, booming voices—twenty different voices issuing simultaneously from the same mouth.

"Oh, Christ," said Professor Qualt.

This time, although she was still in a deep hypnotic trance, Miss Johnson recognized us for what we were. Her eyes glistened blank and glazed, but she pointed her scimitar toward us and screamed; "Intruders! Infidels! Intruders!"

I felt my heartbeat falter as the head of Max Greaves, on its slender snakish stem, turned slowly around and faced us. Its eyes were bright and glittering, and it gave me a faint smile. It was so familiar, yet so hideously unfamiliar, that I felt drained of all strength and totally overwhelmed with fear.

The head spoke. The voices that came out of its mouth were huge and stentorian. They said something in that obscure and frightening dialect, then the head turned away again.

"What did it say?" I shouted at Professor Qualt. "What are we going to do?"

Qualt stayed where he was, tense and alert. "It said something to the effect that we are too puny to harm it," he said, without turning round. "It welcomes us as witnesses to its restoration, and it will devour us when it feels ready. I didn't catch the rest."

"Is that all there is-just a long neck and a head?"

Professor Qualt shook his head. "There's much more of it still inside the jar, and it's all just as hideous as that. Anna?" "I can hear you, professor." "Have you got any bright ideas?" Anna, white-faced and shaking, could only say, "There's nothing we can do. At the moment it's protected by the night-clock. Until it's completely restored, until it's completely out of the jar, the night-clock's spell is absolutely unbreakable."

Max Greaves whispered, "She's right. Only when the spell has gone through the full cycle does the protection of the astral powers cease. And even then-

"Even then what?" I asked him.

"Even then we're trying to pit ourselves against the strongest and fiercest djinn that ever existed, ever, in the whole of the old Arabian world."

"I'm going in," said Professor Qualt. "I want to take a closer look."

"In that case," I said with a dry mouth, "I'm going in with you."

"You don't have to, Harry."

"What do you think I'm going to do?" I asked him. "Stand at the door and watch you get yourself devoured?"

Professor Qualt turned to Anna. "Wait here," he told her. "If it looks like we're in trouble, shut the door and get the hell out of here."

We lifted our hands against our faces to shield our eyes from the heat, then we dodged through the open door and around the side of the turret.

We kept as far back against the wall as we could. It was fiercely hot in there, so hot that my eyeballs dried up and the back of my throat felt like a sand dune. There was something else about the atmosphere, too, apart from heat. I felt that my body was distorted, and that I was looking at everything through the refracting mirror of a desert mirage. It was a weird, inflated sensation, and when I looked down at my legs, they appeared to be bending away from me, short and peculiar like a stick appears to bend in water.

Miss Johnson, on the far side of that terrible jar, was continuing her songs and incantations. The head of Max Greaves swayed and nodded, turning around from time to time to regard us with its baleful, inhuman eyes.

Professor Qualt leaned over toward me and shouted, "There are forty songs and incantations to be sung. Each revives a different part of the djinn's personality. This one she's singing now is the Song of the Evil Lung Termite."

"Jesus," I said unsteadily.

"I've had an idea," said Professor Qualt. "It might give us some time, even if it doesn't get rid of the djinn."

"You mean we rush it? Break the jar or something?"

"That wouldn't do any good. But why not make a grab for Miss Johnson? If she can't finish all her songs, then the djinn won't be able to leave its jar."

I tried to rub my irritated eyes to restore some moisture to them. The heat was getting worse; I pulled my shirt collar open wider and wiped my forehead with the back of my hand.

"What about the spell? I mean, the night-clock will still protect the djinn, won't it, even if we hold the restoration up? I guess that sooner or later it's going to work out a way to get out of there, and if we haven't thought up some way to destroy it by then, it's going to be twice as angry as it is now."

"At least it'll give us some time!"

I coughed. "Well, I can't think of a better idea. Maybe if we both go around the turret in different directions, we can grab her before she starts swinging that sword around."

"Okay," shouted Professor Qualt. "I'm ready when you are."

Maybe he was, but neither of us was ready for Max Greaves. Before we could do anything at all, he stepped into the turret in his flowing robe. His hood was folded back to reveal his scarred and chopped-up face. His eyes were still visible in the crimson and brutalized flesh, but his nose was gone, and there was nothing there but a dark cavity. His arms were lifted, and he was calling something in his odd, palate less voice—a voice that sounded like some distressed creature calling from a swamp.

"Max!" I shouted. "Max, don't go near! Max!"

Max Greaves ignored me, or didn't hear me, and shuffled forward until he was standing only a couple of feet away from the jar. For one eerie moment, he stood staring at his own curiously smiling face, rising from that jar on its serpentine neck, and his mutilated features showed something that could have been fear, but even more than that was sorrow.

"My face," he said. "My face."

And then he lifted his arms again and screamed in that terrible noseless voice: "My face! You promised my face! You promised it!"

There was nothing we could do. Miss Johnson, her eyeballs solid white, with the pupils rolled up into her head, moved toward Max with the slow gliding step of a dancer. I tried to move but my muscles refused. As if in slow motion, I saw the scimitar flash and flicker. It curved through the smoky air and sliced deep into Max's neck. A spray of blood fanned across the room, and without a sound, Max Greaves twisted and dropped to the turret floor, where he lay twitching but dead.

Professor Qualt and I both stepped forward then, but Miss Johnson swung the scimitar at us, and we knew it was going to be useless. The professor reached out and pushed me back against the wall of the turret. "Wait, Harry. Wait. We've lost our advantage for now. Wait."

Miss Johnson, seeing us retreat, threw back her head and let her long blue tongue hang out on her chin, and laughed. The scimitar was tinted pink with Max's blood, and she lifted the blade to her mouth and licked it. I felt sick and turned away.

We watched, powerless as children, as Miss Johnson swung her censer and chanted her monotonous chants. At last she came to the fortieth and final song, the Song of the Nameless Wind, and began to recite the ritual for the raising of a djinn, a ritual so ancient that it was in a Persian dialect that must have died centuries before the birth of Christ. The words were aspirate and hissing, and the very sound of them was enough to make me feel chilled and feverish, even in that furnace like heat.

"Hatkoka hathka, fethmana sespherel. Jinhatha lespoday nen hathoka, jinhatha fethmana!"

The jar, with its hideous head, stirred and groaned. The turret room was crowded with whispers and strange noises. Even the joists of the ceiling seemed to creak and murmur, and the heat rippled the air until Miss Johnson, her head back and her white throat working like someone in an epileptic convulsion, appeared to be melting and dissolving in front of my eyes. She shrieked and choked, her tongue hanging out of her mouth, and she called on the djinn of Ali Babah, the djinn of the N'zwaa, the great and loathsome one, the Forty Stealers of Life, the tearers and renters of flesh, the most terrible of ancient spirits, to arise!

I could hardly look. The djinn rose slowly from the neck of the jar, and anything less like the friendly turbaned genies of story books would be hard to imagine. It was more like a glistening amorphous string of intestines and tubes. It rose up higher and higher, coiling itself in the air above the jar, yard after yard of sickening, pale-colored stuff. It smelled of some terrible sourness, and I was almost suffocated by the heat and the stench,

"Oh God," said Professor Qualt "Oh God protect us."

Miss Johnson, wielding her sacred scimitar, pointed toward us. Swaying like decomposing weed in a sultry ocean, the djinn began to move in our direction, and I knew that we were marked for whatever grisly death the djinn deigned to grant us. A crumbling, enervating paralysis came over me, and I could do nothing at all but watch the thing sway closer and closer. These gruesome strings and cords were the djinn's raw master form, the sickening ectoplasm from which it could magically transform itself into any one of the Forty Thieves and inflict on us a terrible and painful end.

Miss Johnson began to speak, but then a curious thing happened. The djinn swayed away from us, as if recoiling from something it didn't like. I turned my head on a grindingly paralyzed neck, and there, in the doorway, stood Anna. In her hand she was holding up a crescent-shaped piece of silver, the pure and holy token of Islamic devotion.

Miss Johnson lowered her head. Her hair was hanging in sweaty rattails, and her pupils slowly descended out of her head. She swung her scimitar from side to side, but she seemed to be irritated and confused, like the djinn, by the sight of the shining crescent.

Anna took two or three steps into the room, then said, in a high but steady voice, "Professor, Harry, move out of here and get behind me."

Keeping our eyes on the coiling shape of the djinn, we edged our way back toward the door. Anna stood steadfastly between us and the Forty Thieves, holding the crescent aloft and singing softly-at least I thought I heard her singing-an Arabian chant of her own.

"Anna," said Professor Qualt hoarsely, "you must follow us out. You can't keep it off single-handedly!"

Anna didn't move a muscle. She said calmly, "I know the djinn, professor. I know it of old."

The room was now so stifling and filled with incense smoke that I could hardly see Miss Johnson or the writhing djinn, but I knew as well as Professor Qualt that Anna's crescent could only keep them at bay for a little while longer. Amulets and charms, as I had discovered from my own past experience, were never a lasting protection against real spiritual malevolence.

Suddenly, the djinn appeared to change its shape. It swirled in the smoke and seemed to melt and shift. Out of the fog of poppy incense loomed a black bulky thing like a monstrous leech, with blind eyes and a pale, disgusting maw. Anna lifted up her crescent again and spoke some clear, ringing words in Arabic. As quickly as it had transmogrified itself into the leech-beast, the djinn twisted and turned in the smoke and started changing itself into some other grotesque and evil form.

"It's trying to find a form she can't fight," said the professor. "It's trying to wear down her resistance by turning itself into different forms."

"Anna." I started to reach out for her, but the professor checked my hand.

"It's too late now. She has to give it her undivided attention. One lapse in concentration and we're all going to die."

We saw a dim shape like a huge rat, but then Anna spoke the words again, and again the djinn changed. Soon she was chanting the words continuously, and before us, in the smoky gloom, we saw the whole terrifying and revolting company of Thieves that AH Babah had imprisoned in his jar. There were things that shuffled and things that crept; things that had mouthfuls of ragged teeth; things that twisted and coiled; things that ran on hundreds of hairy legs.

I saw a creature that was half-lizard and half-grinning man. I saw a demonic being like a mad Nubian slave. I saw a hunchback whose body was alive with laughing faces, and the turret rang with their laughter. I saw a woman with gaping vaginas that crawled all over her skin like caterpillars. I saw a staggering monstrosity on rows of crutches, like a decayed and leprous beggar.

Like a fearful hallucination, the mythical terrors of an age that was lost and forgotten more than a thousand years ago were brought to life in front of our eyes.

It was these things against which Arabian mothers still warned their children at night; and against which old men still muttered curses. It was these things that even the most forbidden and masochistic of ritualists could only dare to whisper about. These were the Forty Stealers of Life, so terrible that even though Arabic legends had erased their true memory by weaving them into a fairy story of brigands and robbers, they had never been able to erase their name altogether.

Seeing these manifestations, Miss Johnson began to foam at the mouth and screech in total hysteria. She began to cut at her own arms with the scimitar until the blood dripped from the ends of her fingers, and then she actually grasped the razor-sharp blade in her left hand and ran her hand all the way down it, slicing deep into the palm and cutting two or three fingers completely off. She raised the gory hand in triumph, and her self-sacrifice seemed to give the djinn an excited new strength. In the form of some glittering insect, a distorted praying mantis with pincers and quivering mandibles, it began to flicker toward us through the smoke.

Anna was swaying with the exertion of keeping it at bay, but we didn't dare intervene in case the djinn attacked us when her attention was briefly away from it. She lifted the silver crescent once more and spoke the Arabic words louder; the insect-thing hesitated.

Miss Johnson slashed at her robes until they fell from her wounded shoulders in rags. Then she seized the pale nipple of her right breast with the thumb and the only remaining finger of her left hand and sliced it off. I was horrified and nauseated, but her masochistic self-mutilation only seemed to arouse Miss Johnson more, and she smeared her own blood around and around over her stomach as if it gave her sensual pleasure. "Hathoka!" she screamed. "Hathoka jinhatha!"

At that moment, Anna collapsed. Professor Qualt quickly knelt down beside her and tried to pick up the silver crescent, but when he touched it, he recoiled as if he'd been burnt. "Jesus, that thing's red-hot! I can't touch it!" "Just get her out of here!" I yelled. "I'll see if I can-"

The djinn, in its raw master form, had floated nearer than I realized in the smoke. As I tried to help Professor Qualt drag Anna out of the turret, a pale tentacle whipped across the side of my face, stinging my cheek with a caress like a poisonous jellyfish. My face!

I beat the tentacle away with my arm and looked up. The djinn was shifting languidly across the turret room, oily and sinister, a wan squid, the most frightening vision of the night. Out of its coils, the face of Max Greaves suddenly began to materialize, and it stared at me with a humorless grin, as if it were relishing my terror.

"Max," I whispered. "Max, please."

The face continued to smile, but there was no human response on it. Part of its chin flowed away, then reformed.

"Max, let us go, Max, for God's sake."

I was sweating and shaking in the 100-degree heat. As I spoke, Professor Qualt was gradually pulling Anna out the turret door and into the corridor.

The djinn floated nearer. The face of Max Greaves melted away from the twisted branch of ectoplasm on which it had first appeared, and it re-materialized much closer, like a hanged man's head on a dreadful dripping tree.

"Please, Max," I begged.

For a moment, I thought the swaying coils of the djinn were simply going to twist their way around me and scald me to death with their stings. But then the face began to soften and melt once more, and the djinn slithered away from me. In long, white, and almost caressing coils, it rolled across the room and irresistibly began to surround Miss Johnson, who was now kneeling on the floor of the turret in splashes of her own blood, trembling in some kind of insane and hysterical trance.

Professor Qualt took my shoulder from behind and pulled me toward the door, but neither of us could take our eyes off the apparition of the djinn, piling itself in raw and complicated strings around Miss Johnson. She reached her hand back and stroked it, then she began to nuzzle her face against it, like a woman nuzzles up against her lover. Slowly, her hips began to stir, and she reached down and tore away from herself the last few bloody shreds of her robes.

We stared in terror as the djinn twisted itself around her and began to slide up between her parted thighs. She was panting and whining now, and the djinn's greasy coils were pale and muscular as they pressed themselves closer. With her unmutilated hand, she spread open her vulva so that the hideous tentacle could push its way inside. We saw the djinn force what looked like yard after yard of stringy ectoplasm into her body, then Miss Johnson gave such an unnerving scream of pain that we both turned away in helpless fright

"Aaarrgggghhhhhhhhh! Ugghhht Uggghhhhh!" she shrieked. "Oh, it's too much! It's too much pain! It hurts too much! Aaagggghh!"

"For Christ's sake," said Professor Qualt, "what can we do?"

I knelt down beside Anna. She was pale and appeared to be in a deep coma. God only knew if she was going to live or die.

"Anna!" I shouted. "Anna! What can we do?"

For a moment I thought she was too comatose to answer, but then she sleepily opened her eyes and whispered: "Harry..."

I tried to revive her with gentle slaps on her cheeks. "Anna, the djinn's gone berserk! Anna, listen! What can we do?"

From the turret behind us, we heard the distorted groans and bellows of the djinn's over amplified voice, and the screeching and pleading of Miss Johnson. She sounded almost inhuman, like a tortured animal, yet there was a keening note of ecstasy in her voice as well as screams of agony and desperation.

Anna whispered something that I didn't hear. I bent my ear closer. She whispered again. "The night-clock"

Professor Qualt looked at me. "That's it!" he said. "Now the djinn has manifested itself, the night-clock is free for further spells. That means we can use it against the djinn, maybe even destroy it!"

I stood up. "Let's just get the hell out of here first! I don't even know how to use a goddamned night-clock, do you?"

Professor Qualt helped me lift Anna from the floor, and together we carried her as quickly as we could down the long corridor to the staircase.

"Maybe it doesn't matter," panted Professor Qualt. "Maybe you can work it without too much experience."

I took Anna's legs as we stumbled heavily down in the darkness. "I wouldn't like to bet on it," I told him.

Behind us, the frantic shrieks of Miss Johnson were echoing down the corridors, and the ghastly mumbling voices of the djinn made the window-panes rattle and vibrate.

We actually made it outside. It was fresh and warm out there, and up above us, the crescent moon shone and faded and shone again behind a sea of hurrying clouds. There was a sharp scent of brine in the air, and the lawn looked wide and wild. We dragged Anna across the gravel driveway, and then shouldered her between us through the long grass to the night-clock.

I laid Anna down, and Professor Qualt checked her pulse with his wristwatch. Meanwhile, I went over to the night-clock and examined the extraordinary Arabic signs and pictographs with increasing bewilderment and pessimism.

There was a terrible anguished cry from the house, which after a few moments was drowned by the booming of the djinn. In the windows of the Gothic turret there was a dim and flickering light, and for just a few seconds I saw a blurred silhouette move across it that made my flesh creep.

"It's another of the Forty Thieves!" said Professor Qualt thickly. "It's raping her with every one of its manifestations!"

"You mean those things-those things we saw- they're actually-"

Professor Qualt stood up. "All except one," he said quietly. "The fortieth manifestation is the desert wind. That's one of those magical cyclones the Arabs in the Sahara call 'djinnns.' They're so common they don't even think anything of them. When a djinn becomes a desert wind, that means it is going off on a kind of rampage of vengeance. It's the final destructive act in retaliation for being bottled up so long. From what the legends say, it's incredibly dangerous."

I looked at him seriously. "You mean that thing up there could eventually turn into a cyclone?"

He nodded "It will when its Forty Thieves are finished with Miss Johnson."

I swallowed and looked down at the night-clock. "In that case, I think I'd better try and get this thing going."

Professor Qualt came and stood beside me. "You have to hold it," he said. "That's right, one hand on each side of the plinth. Now bow your head to it, look at the carvings, and see if you can't concentrate enough to make it work."

I held onto the night-clock and did what he told me. "Don't you think that you'd be better at this?" I asked him.

"No, I know too much about the magic of the djinns. I think I'd be too vulnerable to any kind of sorcerous backlash. This night-clock is like a stereo amplifier-if you overload it, it can give you an earful of feedback, except in this case the feedback is probably instant death."

I coughed. "Thanks for telling me."

The screams from Winter Sails were growing louder and more distorted. I bent forward and stared at the curious birds and animals that were engraved on the face of the night-clock; I tried to concentrate all my energy into thinking about the djinn, and how urgently we needed to destroy it.

Gradually, silently, the engraved lines on the dial began to glow with a dim fluorescence, and I began to feel the night-clock almost humming in my hands.

"Now kneel down," said Professor Qualt. "Kneel down and line up the holes on the pointer with the turret."

I knelt down on the dry grass and put my eye to the two-dimensional holes. Slowly they focused themselves together into one hole, and through the hole, I could see the window of the Gothic turret. Inside it, spasmodically lit by a guttering light, I saw shadows and shapes that defied all imagination. I didn't know what they were and I didn't care. All I concentrated on was destroying the djinn. I saw a

claw like a monstrous crab's claw that waved for one moment, but I tried to think about killing the djinn and nothing else.

The night-clock glowed brighter and hummed with increasing fervor, but somehow I felt there was no energy in it, no power. I turned to Professor Qualt and shouted: "It's not working! It's too weak!"

Professor Qualt came close and knelt beside me. "You'll have to call on someone to help you!" he yelled. "The djinn must be fighting back! Someone like AH Babah himself, or any other strong magician!"

"You have to be kidding!" I said. "Ali Babah?"

"Well, anyone!"

"I don't know any magicians!"

Professor Qualt shrugged. Over the lawn, we could hear Miss Johnson howling grotesquely, her howls culminating in a piercing scream.

"Just try Ali Babah!" shouted Professor Qualt. "It can't hurt!"

I nodded and concentrated once more on the night-clock. Once I had the turret in focus, I began to chant the name "Ali Babah" over and over, under my breath.

"Louder!" said Professor Qualt

I shouted "Ali Babah!" louder.

"It's no use!" shouted the professor. "Louder!"

"Ali Babah!" I screamed. "Ali Babah, help me! Help me, Ali Babah, for the love of everything!"

At that moment, all the windows in the Gothic turret shattered and the turret itself imploded in a spray of glass and timber. Tiles whipped and clattered furiously off the roof of Winter Sails, and out of the wreckage of the turret rose a twisting spire of dust and smoke that tore along the gables with fiendish force, until the night sky was littered with flying debris.

"It's the desert wind!" said Professor Qualt, in a voice more nerve-wracked than I had ever heard from him before.

"Ali Babah!" I screamed again. "Ali Babah, help me!"

The djinn, with the dreary moan of an approaching tornado, circled the house in a whirl of dust and gravel and broken glass. It began to mount in size, until it was roaring and spinning almost 100 feet into the sky, a dark and demonic typhoon that snatched bushes up by their roots and smashed the garage doors of Winter Sails into matchwood.

I knew then that Ali Babah, wherever his spirit was, was not going to help me. I felt defenseless and lost and alone; I rested my forehead against the night-clock. Professor Qualt too realized that we were going to lose this struggle, and that there was nothing we could do to hold back the shrieking evil of the djinn.

There was only one thing. Back in the turret, just as the djinn had been about to encircle me, I had seen the face of Max Greaves, and I had called on Max to save me. Maybe, by some flukish twist of chance, he could help me again. I raised my head. The djinn was already crossing the driveway toward us, sending a huge spray of gravel in all directions.

"Harry," Professor Qualt shouted, "it's too late!"

I tried not to listen. I concentrated on the night-clock again and whispered, "Max, help me." I said it again and again. "Max help me, for God's sake, help me." Then, oddly, the night-clock seemed to tilt in my hands and hum with renewed strength. I had a strange empty feeling inside me, and I didn't know if I was kneeling on the grass or standing in the house or where I was.

I knew then that I was rising to my feet. I was rising to my feet and I was moving out of a silent room. I was walking through light and shadow in a silent house. I felt as if I was moving by some occult magnetism, gliding like a skater down a long and suffocating corridor. The corridor seemed endless and yet I was calm.

I opened my eyes. There was a piercing whistle of wind that almost completely deafened me. Through slitted eyes I looked up and saw the 100-foot cyclone of the djinn ripping up grass and turf with the ferocity of a rip saw as it crossed the lawn toward us. I had to hold onto the night-dock to keep my balance, and I looked around desperately for Professor Qualt and Anna.

"Anna!" I yelled. "Anna! Professor!"

"She's come to!" shouted Professor Qualt. I hadn't seen him because he was around the front of the night-clock, bending over Anna. She still looked white, but she was sitting up now, trying to struggle to her feet.

"We'll have to try and make a run for it!" bellowed Professor Qualt. "Over there, into the trees! Are you ready?"

"I can't hear you!" I shouted back. "You go on! Take Anna!"

But Anna didn't seem to want to go. She stumbled toward me and crouched down next to me beside the night-clock, and when I looked at her, she was wild-eyed and shaking all over. "Anna!"

She pulled at my sleeve. "You have to make it work!" she screamed. "You have to kill the djinn! You must, Harry, you must!" "Anna, I don't-

"You must, Harry! It's after me! Don't you understand! The djinn is after me! Miss Johnson was the descendant of the plain sister, but I'm the descendant of the beautiful sister! It wants me. Harry! It's waited all this time and it wants me!"

I stared at her helplessly. The shrieking wind was too strong now to try and run away, and I just didn't know what more the night-clock could do. I could hardly see for the grit and the dust in my eyes, and Anna stared at me in terror.

"Anna!" I shouted, as if to tell her that I couldn't do anything. But then the cyclone tore the night-clock out of the ground right in front of me and burst it into a stinging hail of stone fragments that knocked me flat on my back in the grass, leaving me stunned and bleeding with the wind pinning me uselessly against the ground.

I had a brief and confused idea that I was descending a flight of stairs, that I was gliding across a graveled driveway, but then I struggled to raise my head and saw Anna running across the lawn.

Professor Qualt tried to reach her, too, but the howling djinn sent him tumbling over and over, and I heard his leg crack as he fell.

"For a split second, Anna was running ahead of the djinn, which loomed behind her in a relentless spiral of torn grass and soil. But in front of my eyes it caught her, and I saw her clothes ripped off her and blown into the moaning night sky in tattered fragments.

A harsh geyser of soil and stones and lacerating roots blasted upward over her body. She raised her arms jerkily and helplessly as the wind tore the hair from her scalp bit by bit and sent its bloody pieces flying into the night. Then it actually flayed the skin off her body, in fluttering and snapping ribbons, exposing the bare muscles. I saw those torn away, too, and the triangular muscles on her back flapped upward like wings. Then-before I buried my face in the grass-I saw her insides gush up to the sky in a slushy torrent and her bones flung everywhere like sticks.

The djinn howled even louder and began to spin in my direction. I rolled sideways across the lawn, trying to make for the beach, but I knew that if it caught me, I didn't stand a dog's chance.

It was just then that a weird and hollow voice inside me said stop! I opened my eyes but they didn't seem to open at all. I was gliding across the lawns, and above me, I could see the raging pillar of the djinn, a black and glowering cloud with reddened eyes staring from the darkness of its towering shape. I knew that I was not at all afraid of the djinn, that to me it was nothing more than a disobedient cur to be sent back to its kennel. I raised my hands and said stop! once again, and as I said it a third time, the wind began to blow more softly with a mournful, sulky tone.

I appeared to be moving backward, not in space but into my mind. I saw worlds and suns and darkness and dazzling light. I heard voices that echoed, and I moved past landscapes and movement and colors and strange mountains. I felt something touch my face-my facet-and then the wind was silent and there was nothing to see or listen to at all.

I lifted myself, bruised and coughing, from the devastated lawn. It was totally quiet, except for the distant soft seething of the surf. I stumbled across to where Professor Qualt was lying, and I said hoarsely, "Professor?"

He was white and sweating and he was holding his leg, but he was able to manage a tense little grin. "It's my leg," he said. "Broke the damned thing."

I stood up and looked around. There was no sign of Anna at all. Not a shred, not a mark, not a mote of dust. But there was someone lying about fifty yards away, face down on the torn-up turf, and they were obviously badly hurt.

I limped over as quickly as I could. I recognized the robes even before I saw who it was. I got on my knees next to him, and using all my remaining strength, I pushed him over onto his back. He was more than hurt, he was dead. But it wasn't the djinn who had killed him.

"Max," I said quietly. "Christ, Max, thank you."

He was dead when Miss Johnson had struck him down. Yet here he was, lying on the lawn. He must-must-have walked here on his own. The night-clock had summoned him, had somehow invested his dead body with my strength and my determination, and had made those stiffening fibers move and those dead legs walk. The night-clock had resurrected my wizard for me, and it was Max Greaves.

There was more, though. This was not just Max Greaves, but the Max Greaves I had once known, long before the days of jars and jinni and malevolent magic. His face had been restored to him, and he lay there in the pallid light of the crescent moon, not smiling, but at rest.

Alive, Max Greaves had been powerless against the djinn. But dead, with no threat of physical agony able to deter him, he had been able to command the djinn to return to the ancient netherworld from where it has originally come. On its return, the djinn had obviously been obliged to return to Max

Greaves the one thing that allowed it to exist in the world of men and women-his face. Djinnns are great and threatening spirits that hold power over all demons of the Arabian occult, but they cannot disobey the command of a human spirit

I stood up wearily and checked my watch. The crystal was broken, but it was still ticking. I walked back over to Professor Qualt "Can you hold on? I'll go call for an ambulance."

Qualt clenched his teeth. "No, don't do that, They'll see the house, the lawns, everything. Better to keep it as quiet as you can."

"What about Miss Johnson? And if you're ready for the shock, that's Max Greaves's body down there. With a perfect face and a cut in his neck like the Grand Canyon."

Professor Qualt shook his head painfully. "That doctor-what's-his-name-Jarvis. He'll help us out. He wouldn't want anyone to know that he buried an empty coffin the first time they gave your godfather a funeral-"

Completely without warning, he passed out. I went back to the driveway and got my car. It had a crack in the windshield and gravel scratches all over its paintwork,-but otherwise it looked okay. I swung it around and drove it onto the lawn, so that I could pick up Professor Qualt and take him to hospital.

My last-my last and final-view of Winter Sails was out of the back window of my car. I slowed down as I came to the leaning trees at the head of the driveway, and I took one quick look. It was as white and ghostly as ever, as it stood by the Cape Cod sea, with hollow eyeless windows and sagging rafters, the long grass blowing on the lawns.

It wasn't until I had delivered Professor Qualt safely to the local clinic and was sitting across the street with an early-morning Bloody Mary and a cigarette, that I began to cry. I watched myself in the steamed-up mirror at the back of the bar as the tears rolled down my cheeks; the barkeep frowned across at me as if I had just arrived in Massachusetts from another world.

Epilogue

Iranian Cultural Program

New York City Dear Professor Qualt,

I thank you on behalf of myself and all my colleagues for your kind note of condolence. Ms. Modena had not been working for my department for very long, but her enthusiasm and vivacity will be sorely missed.

In answer to your questions about her background and about the legends of the Nazwah or N'zwaa, I can only say there is indeed a story that a plain girl gave up her body to a terrible djinn many centuries ago in order to protect her beautiful sister. Ms. Modena spoke about the legend to me several times, because she believed it was connected with a rare artifact of Persian pottery which she was trying to trace for us.

I regret that I cannot recall all of our discussions on the subject, but I do remember that Ms. Modena was fascinated by the inconsistencies in the legend and spent many hours in our library seeking further information. What chiefly troubled her was the fact that, in spite of the plain sister's self-sacrifice to the djinn, the beautiful sister still died, even though the djinn had made a pact that he would not harm her. Since djinns were apparently as firmly bound by agreements as any other being, Ms. Modena told me that she could only assume that, in some way, the plain sister had not kept her part of the bargain.

I remember that she came across an interesting fragment of evidence in an old story of the days of Hasan i Sabah, in which it was said that there was a family of plain women who, generation by generation, pursued the quest of seeking a magic bottle, in which it was said that a genie lived. Centuries before, this genie was supposed to have had carnal relations with the first of their line and given that first plain woman-if I can clearly recall Ms. Modena's words-"ecstasy beyond all human comprehension."

Although this story was written many hundreds of years after the original event was supposed to have taken place, Ms. Modena believed that this was, at the very least, a suggestion that the plain sister had broken the pact between herself and the djinn by actually enjoying her torment. Although the djinn possessed her in many appalling forms and she was eventually killed by his ministrations, she was so delighted by the carnal pleasure of the torture that she would have done anything to have more, and probably agreed to allow the djinn to destroy her beautiful sister in return for further ecstasy.

There are later stories which indicate that both sisters, at the time of their deaths, were pregnant. The plain sister was apparently impregnated by the djinn itself, although we cannot be sure of this, and it may have been one of the sorcerers of the N'zwaa or even (as Ms. Modena aptly put it) a stray goatherd. The beautiful sister was pregnant by her fiancé.

Both the babies were removed from the bodies of the sisters when they were killed and given to women of the surrounding villages to look after. Possibly the N'zwaa wanted to rear them (since the babies were such a peculiarity) as future sacrifices to their cult's demons and djinns. However, as the story goes, both babies survived and left the region, which suggests they lived in the time of K'oris the witch-hunter, who was a local official dedicated to stamping out illegal practices and demonic religions such as that of the N'zwaa.

Ms. Modena believed that throughout the years, the family of the plain sister sought the djinn the world over, hoping that they might live again through the terrible ecstasy that had created them; and that in their turn the family of the beautiful sister sought the descendants of the plain sister, so that they might wreak their revenge on them for the betrayal of their ancestor. I hardly knew whether to believe her or not, but I have come across stranger truths in my work on ancient artifacts, such as the time in Aqaba during the war when I was shown a piece of "magic carpet" which flew around my tent like a frenzied butterfly.

There was only one other point that I remember from Ms. Modena's story. She said that if ever a descendant of the beautiful sister found the Jar of the Djinn, then she would know that the descendant of the plain sister could not be far away. But she would always be in mortal danger, because it was the daughters of the beautiful sister that the djinn most wanted to possess, and once the daughter of the plain sister was dead, there would be nothing on heaven or earth to protect her from it.

I sincerely hope that these few fragments of recollection have been of some use, and I look forward to the day when you can call at my office to discuss this and perhaps other matters connected with Iranian antiquities at leisure.

I remain your obedient

K. L. Asrah.

Bedford Street,

Cape Cod.

Dear Mr. Erskine,

Since we last met, I have finalized all the arrangements for the funerals of Miss Johnson, Miss Modena, and the other gentleman. As you said yourself, it was most unfortunate that all three of them should have been so susceptible to swine flu, and my death certificates show this to be the cause of extinction.

I have looked through Winter Sails at some length for the year, but I regret there is no trace whatsoever. It is quite gone or destroyed in the storm. I cannot say. The house anyway is now up for auction, and I

doubt if we shall hear of it again.

If you are ever at the Cape again, do not hesitate to call for tea perhaps.

Best wishes,

M. Jarvis, M.D.

West Good Hope Road,

Milwaukee, Wis.

Dear Harry,

A brief note to thank you for all your help. I am now spending some time at the U. of Wis. delving into the less scary side of ethnic pottery.

I think you may be right when you say the Jar of the Djinn was a complete freak, although I came across a story in an old copy of the Persian Occult Encyclopedia which says that all jars are used by demons and

genies as hiding places, and that it is worthwhile closing the lids of empty jars and bottles at night to prevent demons lodging in them, because once they're in they take a great deal of getting out.

Never mind, we mustn't let superstition run amok, must we? But thank you anyway for everything you did. It was a bad time best forgotten.

Yours,

Gordon Qualt

These few letters are all I have left to remind me of the djinn and Anna. I keep them in the top left-hand drawer of my old rolltop desk, and now and again I take them out and read them slowly and carefully, then put them back.

There's something else I do, too, as a matter of habit. When it's dark, and the wind whistles softly through the fire escape outside my apartment, or rattles and nudges at the door that leads out into the corridor, I can't help but look at the two tall jars that stand on my mantelpiece. They're Victorian, and they're green-glazed and ugly, but I can't stop myself from thinking that maybe some nineteenth-century hobgoblin is nestling malevolently there, and that one night, when I'm asleep, the time will come when it feels like manifesting itself in the stillness and darkness of my room.

You see, it's always easy to frighten yourself, but the truth of what's really in those jars and bottles is even worse.