

Jihad

Pain was a curtain between Lawrence and the world; pain was his world, there was nothing else that mattered. "Take him out of here, you fools! You've spoiled him!" Lawrence heard Bey Nahi's exclamation of disgust dimly; and it took his pain-shattered mind a moment to translate it from Turkish to English.

Spoiled him; as if he was a piece of meat. Well, now he was something less than that.

He could not reply; he could only retch and sob for mercy. There was no part of him that was not in excruciating pain.

Pain. All his life, since he had been a boy, pain had been his secret terror and obsession. Now he was drugged with it, a too-great force against which he could not retain even a shred of dignity.

As he groveled and wept, conversation continued on above his head. There were remonstrations on the part of the soldiers, but the Bey was adamant—and angry. Most of the words were lost in the pain, but he caught the sense of a few. "Take him out—" and "Leave him for the jackals."

So, the Bey was not to keep him until he healed. Odd. After Nahi's pawing and fondling, and swearing of desire, Lawrence would have thought—

"You stay." That, petulantly, to the corporal, the youngest and best-looking of the lot. Coincidentally, he was the one who had been the chiefest and most inventive of the torturers. He had certainly been the one that had enjoyed his role the most. "Take that out," the Bey told the others. Lawrence assumed that Nahi meant him.

If he had been capable of appreciating anything, he would have appreciated that—the man who had wrought the worst on his flesh, should take his place in the Bey's bed.

The remaining two soldiers seized him by the arms. Waves of pain rolled up his spine and into his brain, where they crashed together, obliterating thought. He couldn't stand up; he couldn't even get his feet under him. His own limbs no longer obeyed him.

They dragged him outside; the cold air on his burning flesh made him cry out again, but this time no one laughed or struck him. Once outside, his captors were a little gentler with him; they draped his arms over their shoulders, and half-carried him, letting him rest most of his weight on them. The nightmarish journey seemed to last a lifetime, yet it was only to the edge of the town.

Deraa. The edge of Deraa. The edge of the universe. He noted, foggily, that he did not recognize the street or the buildings as they passed; they must have brought him to the opposite side of the town. There was that much more distance now between himself and his friends and allies. Distance controlled and watched by the enemy.

Assuming he wanted to reach them. Assuming he wanted them to find him, see him—see what had been done to him, guess at the lacerations that were not visible.

No.

His captors let him down onto the muddy ground at the side of the road. Gently, which was surprising. One of them leaned over, and muttered something—Lawrence lost the sense of it in the pain. He closed his eyes and snuggled down into the mud, panting for breath. Every breath was an agony, as something, probably a broken bone, made each movement of his ribs stab him sharply.

He heard footsteps retreating, quickly, as if his erstwhile captors could not leave his presence quickly enough.

Tears of despair, shameful, shamed tears, trickled down his cheeks. The unmoved stars burned down on him, and the taste of blood and bile was bitter in his mouth.

Slowly, as the pain ebbed to something he could think through, he itemized and cataloged his injuries to regain control of his mind, as he had tried to count the blows of the whip on his back. The bones in his foot, fractured during the chaos of the last sabotage-raid, had been shattered again. The broken rib made breathing a new torture. Somewhere in the background of everything, the dull pain of his head spoke of a concussion, which had probably happened when they kicked him to the head of the stairs. The lashes that had bit into his groin had left their own burning tracks behind.

His back was one shapeless weight of pain. He had thought to feel every separate, bleeding welt, but he could only feel the accumulated agony of all of them in a mass. But as he lay in the mud, the cold of the night numbed him, leaving only that final injury still as sharp and unbearable as ever, the one that was not visible. The laceration of his soul.

Now he knew how women felt; to be the helpless plaything of others, stronger or more powerful. To be forced to give of their bodies whether or not they willed or wanted it. To be handled and used— Like a piece of meat— And worst of all, at one level, the certainty that he had somehow deserved it all. That he had earned his punishment. That he had asked for his own violation. After all, wasn't that what they said of women, too? It was this final blow that had cracked the shell of his will and brought down the walls of the citadel of his integrity.

How could he face them, his followers, now? They would watch him, stare at him, and murmur to one another—no matter how silent he kept, they would know, surely they would know. And knowing, how could they trust him?

They would not, of course. He no longer trusted himself. His nerve was broken, his will, his soul broken across that guardroom bench. There was nothing left but despair. He literally had nothing left to live for; the Revolt had become his life, and without it, he had no will to live. The best thing he could do for the Revolt would be to die. Perhaps Feisal would take it upon himself to avenge his strange English friend, Aurens; certainly Auda, that robber, would use Aurens' death as an excuse to further raid the Turks. And Ali, Ali ibn el Hussein; he would surely exact revenge. But could they hold the Revolt together?

Inshallah. As God wills it. Here, in his extremity, he had at last come to the fatalism of the Moslem. It was no longer his concern. Life was no longer his concern. Only death, and the best way to meet it, without further torment, to drown his shame in its dark waters where no one would guess what those waters hid.

This would not be the place to die. Not here, where his beaten and brutalized body would draw attention—where his anxious followers might even come upon it

and guess the foulness into which he had fallen. Let him crawl away somewhere; let him disappear into the waste and die where he would not be found, and let his death become a mystery to be wondered at.

Then he would be a martyr, if the Revolt could have such a thing. It might even be thought that he vanished, like one of the old prophets, into the desert, to return at some vague future date. His death would become a clean and shining thing. They would remember him as the confident leader, not the battered, bloody rag of humanity he was now.

He lay in a sick stupor, his head and body aching and growing slowly numb with cold. Finally a raging thirst brought him to life—and spurred him to rise.

He struggled to his feet, and rocked in place, moaning, his shaking hands gathering his torn clothing about him. He might have thought that this was a nightmare, save for the newly-wakened pain. Somewhere he heard someone laughing, and the sound shocked him like cold water. Deraa felt inhuman with vice and cruelty; he could not die here.

The desert. The desert was clean. The desert would purge him, as it had so many times before.

He stopped at a trough by the wells; scooped a little water into his hands and rubbed it over his face, then drank. He looked up at the stars, which would not notice if there was one half-Arab Englishman less on the earth, and set off, one stumbling step at a time, for the clean waste beyond this vile pit of humanity. He walked for a long time, he thought. The sounds of humanity faded, replaced by the howling of dogs or jackals, off in the middle distance. Tears of pain blurred his sight; he hoped he could find some hole to hide himself away before dawn, a grave that he might fall into, and falling, fall out of life.

He stumbled, jarring every injury into renewed agony, and a white light of pain blinded him. He thought he would die then, dropping in his tracks; then he thought that the blackness of unconsciousness would claim him.

But the light did not fade; it grew brighter. It burned away the pain, burned away thought, burned away everything but a vague sense of self. It engulfed him, conquered him, enveloped him. He floated in a sea of light, dazzled, sure that he had dropped dead on the road. But if that were true, where was he? And what was this?

Even as he wondered that, he became aware of a Presence within the light. Even as he recognized it, it spoke.

I AM I.

On the bank of the Palestine Railway above the huddle of Deraa they waited; Sherif Ali ibn el Hussein, together with the two men that Aurens had designated as his bodyguards, Halim and Faris, and the sheik of Tafas, Talal el Hareidhin. "Tell me again," Ali said fiercely. "Tell me what it was you did."

Faris, old and of peasant stock, did not hesitate, although this was the fifth time in as many hours that Ali had asked the question. Talal hissed through his teeth, but did not interrupt.

"We came into Deraa by the road, openly," Faris recounted, as patient as the

sand. "There was wire, and trenches, some flying machines in the sheds; some men about, but they took no note of us. We walked on, into Deraa. A Syrian asked after our villages, and whether the Turks were there; I think he meant to desert. We left him and walked on again; someone called after us in Turkish, which we feigned not to understand. Then another man, in a better uniform, ran after us. He took Aurens by the arm, saying 'The Bey wants you.' He took Aurens away, through the tall fence, into their compound. This was when I saw him no more. I hung about, but there was no sign of him although I watched until well after nightfall. The Turks became restless, and looked evilly at me, so I left before they could take me too."

Talal shook his head. "This is pointless," he said. "Aurens is either dead or a prisoner, and in neither case can we help him. If the former, it is the will of Allah; if the latter, we must think of how long he will deceive them, and where we must go when he does."

"Into the desert, whence we came," Ali said glumly. "The Revolt is finished. There is no man of us who can do as he has done, for there is no man of us who has not a feud with another tribe; there is not a one of us who has no tribe to answer to. There is no one we may trust to whom the English will listen, much less give gold and guns to. We are finished."

Talal widened his eyes at that, but did not speak. Ali took a last look at Deraa, and the death of their hopes, and turned resolutely away.

"Where do we go, lord?" asked Faris, humbly, the peasant still.

"To Azrak," Ali replied. "We must collect ourselves, and then scatter ourselves. If Aurens has been taken and betrayed us, we must think to take ourselves where the Turks cannot find us."

The others nodded at this gloomy wisdom, as the rains began again, falling down impartially upon Turks and Bedouin alike.

The ride to the old fortress of Azrak, which Aurens and his followers had taken for the winter, was made longer by their gloom. There was not one among them who doubted the truth of Ali's words; and Ali thought perhaps that there was not one among them who was not trying to concoct some heroic scheme, either to rescue Aurens, or to avenge him. But a thousand unconnected raids of vengeance would not have a quarter of the power of the planned and coordinated raids Aurens had led them in. And there was still the matter of gold and guns—gold, to buy the loyalty of the wilder tribes, to make Suni fight beside Shia, half-pagan desert tribesman beside devout Meccan. Guns, because there were never enough guns, never enough ammunition, and because there were those who would fight for the promise of guns who would not be moved for anything else. Swords would not prevail against the Turkish guns, no matter how earnest the wielder. They must gather their people, each his own, and scatter. Ali would take it upon himself to bear the evil news to Feisal, who would, doubtless, take it to his father and the English.

More ill thoughts; how long would King Hussein, ever jealous of his son's popularity and inclined to mistrust him, permit Feisal even so much as a bodyguard? Without Aurens to speak to the English, and the English to temper the father, the son could not rally the Revolt either.

It was truly the death of their hopes.

The fortress loomed in the distance, dark and dismal in the rain. Ali did not think he could bear to listen to the spectral wailings of the ghost-dogs of Beni Hillal about the walls tonight. He would gather his people and return to

his tribe— What was that noise?

He raised his eyes from contemplating the neck of his camel, just as a shaft of golden light, as bright as the words of the Koran, broke through the clouds. Where it struck the ground, on the road between them and the fortress, there was a stark white figure, that seemed to take in the golden light and transmute it to his own brightness.

Ali squinted against the light. Who was this? Was it mounted?

Yes, as it drew nearer, strangely bringing the beam of sunlight with it, he saw that it was mounted. Not upon a camel, but upon a horse of a whiteness surpassing anything Ali had ever seen. Not even the stud reft away from the Turks was of so noble a color—

Now he saw what the noise was; behind the rider came every man of the fortress, cheering and firing into the air—

Ali goaded his mount into a loping canter, his heart in his throat. It could not be, could it?

From the canter he urged the camel into a gallop. The size was right; the shape—but whence the robes, the headcloth, even the headropes, of such dazzling whiteness? They had been mired in mud for months, he had not thought ever to see white robes until spring.

It was. His heart leapt with joy. It was! The figure was near enough to see features now; and it was not to be mistaken for any other. Aurens!

He reined his camel in beside the white stallion, and the beast did not even shy, it simply halted, though Aurens made no move to stop it. He raised his hand, and the mob at his back fell respectfully silent.

Ali looked down at his friend; Aurens looked up, and there was a strange fire in those blue eyes, a burning that made Ali rein his camel back a pace. There was something there that Ali had never seen before, something that raised the hair on the back of his neck and left him trembling between the wish to flee and the wish to fall from his camel's back and grovel at the Englishman's feet.

"Lawrence?" Ali said, using the English name, rather than the one they all called him. As if by using that name, he could drive that strangeness from Aurens' eyes. "Lawrence? How did you escape from the Turks?"

The blue eyes burned brighter, and the robes he wore seemed to glow. "Lawrence is dead," he said. "The Turks slew him. There is only Aurens. Aurens, and the will of Allah."

Ali's blood ran hot and cold by turns as he stared down into those strange, unhuman blue eyes. "And what," he whispered, as he would whisper in a mosque, "is the will of Allah?"

At last the eyes released him, leaving him shivering with reaction, and with the feeling that he had gazed into something he could not, and would never, understand.

"The will of Allah," said Aurens, gazing toward Deraa, toward Damascus, and beyond, "Is this."

Silence, in which not even the camels stirred.

"There will be jihad."

General Allenby swore, losing the last of his composure. "He's where?" the commander of the British forces in the Middle East shouted, as his aides winced and the messenger kept his upper lip appropriately stiff in the face of the general's anger.

"Outside of Damascus, sir," he repeated. "I caught up with him there." He paused for a moment, for if this much of the message had the general in a rage, the rest of it would send him through the roof. He was sweatingly grateful that it was no longer the custom to slay the bearer of bad news. "He sent me to tell you, sir, that if you wish to witness the taking of Damascus, you had best find yourself an aeroplane."

The general did, indeed, go through the roof. Fortunately, early on in the tirade, Allenby said something that the messenger could take as a dismissal, and he took himself out.

There was a mob lying in wait for him in the officers' mess.

"What did he say?" "What did he do?" "Is it true he's gone native?" "Is it—"

The messenger held up his hands. "Chaps! One at a time! Or else, let me tell it once, from the beginning."

The hubbub cooled then, and he was allowed to take a seat, a throne, rather, while the rest of them gathered around him, as attentive as students upon a Greek philosopher.

Or as Aurens' men upon his word. The similarity did not escape him. What he wondered now, was how he had escaped that powerful personality. Or had he been permitted to escape, because it suited Aurens' will to have him take those words back to Jerusalem?

First must come how he had found Aurens—he could no more think of the man as "T. E. Lawrence" than he could think of the Pope as "Binky." There was nothing of Britain in the man he had spoken to, save only the perfect English, and the clipped, precise accent. Not even the blue eyes—they had held something more alien than all the mysteries of the east.

"I was told he had last been seen at Deraa, so that was where I went to look for him. He wasn't there; but his garrison was."

"His garrison! These wogs couldn't garrison a stable!" There was an avalanche of comments about that particular term; most disparaging. Kirkbride waited until the comments had subsided.

"I tell, you, it was a garrison." He shook his head. "I can't explain it. As wild as you like, tribesmen riding like devils in their games outside, the Turkish headquarters wrecked and looted—but everything outside that, untouched. The Turks, prisoners, housed and fed and clean—the guards on the town, as disciplined as—" He lacked words. The contrast had been so great, he could hardly believe it. But more than that, the town had been held by men from a dozen different tribes, or more—and yet there was no serious quarreling, no feuding. When he ventured to ask questions, it had been "Aurens said," and "Aurens commanded," as though Aurens spoke for Allah.

Aurens, it appeared, was on the road to Damascus, sweeping all before him.

"They gave me a guide, and sent me off camel-back, and what was the oddest, I would have sworn that they knew I was coming and were only waiting for me." That had been totally uncanny. The moment he had appeared, he had been escorted to the head of the garrison, some Sheik or other, then sent immediately out to the waiting guide and saddled camel. And the only answer to his question of "Where are you taking me?" was "Aurens commands."

Deraa had been amazing. The situation outside Damascus was beyond imagination.

As he described it for his listeners, he could not fault them for their expressions of disbelief. He would not have believed it, if he had not seen it. Massed before Damascus was the greatest Arab army the world had ever seen. Kirkbride had been an Oxford scholar in History, and he could not imagine that such a gathering had ever occurred even at the height of the Crusades. Tribe after feuding tribe was gathered there, together, in the full strength of fighters. Boys as young as their early teens, and scarred old greybeards. There was order; there was discipline. Not the "discipline" of the British regulars, of drill and salute, of uniforms and ranks—a discipline of a peculiarly Eastern kind, in which individual and tribal differences were forgotten, submerged in favor of a goal that engaged every mind gathered here in a kind of white-hot fervor. Kirkbride had recognized Bedouins that were known to be half-pagan alongside Druses, alongside King Hussein's own devout guard from Mecca—

That had brought him up short, and in answer to his stammered question, his guide had only smiled whitely. "You shall see," he said only. "When we reach Aurens."

Reach Aurens they did, and he was brought into the tent as though into the Presence. He was announced, and the figure in the spotlessly white robes turned his eyes on the messenger.

His listeners stilled, as some of his own awe communicated itself to them. He had no doubt, at that moment, that Aurens was a Presence. The blue eyes were unhuman; something burned in them that Kirkbride had never seen in all of his life. The face was as still as marble, but stronger than tempered steel. There was no weakness in this man, anywhere.

Aurens would have terrified him at that moment, except that he remembered the garrison holding Deraa. The Turks there were cared for, honorably. Their wounded were getting better treatment than their own commanders gave them. Somewhere, behind the burning eyes, there was mercy as well.

It took him a moment to realize that the men clustered about Aurens, as disciples about a master, included King Hussein, side-by-side, and apparently reconciled, with his son Feisal. King Hussein, pried out of Mecca at last—

Clearly taking a subservient role to Aurens, a foreigner, a Christian.

Kirkbride had meant to stammer out his errand then—except that at that moment, there came the call to prayer. Wild and wailing, it rang out across the camp.

Someone had translated it for Kirkbride once, imperfectly, or so he said. God alone is great; I testify that there are no Gods but God, and Mohammed is his Prophet. Come to prayer; come to security. God alone is great; there is no God but God.

And Aurens, the Englishman, the Christian, unrolled his carpet, faced Mecca with the rest, and fell upon his face.

That kept Kirkbride open-mouthed and speechless until the moment of prayer was over, and all rose again, taking their former places.

"He did what?" The officers were as dumbfounded as he had been.

Once again, Kirkbride was back in that tent, under the burning, blue gaze of those eyes. "He said to tell Allenby that if he wanted to see the taking of Damascus, he should find an aeroplane, else it would happen before he got there." Kirkbride swallowed, as the mess erupted in a dozen shouted conversations at once.

Some of those involved other encounters with Aurens over the past few weeks. How he had been in a dozen places at once, always riding a white Arabian stallion or a pure white racing camel of incredible endurance. How he had rallied the men of every tribe. How he had emptied Mecca of its fighting men.

How he had appeared, impeccably uniformed, with apparently genuine requisition orders for guns, ammunition, explosives, supplies. How he had vanished into the desert with laden camels—and only later, were the orders proved forgeries so perfect that even Allenby could not be completely sure he had not signed them.

How, incredibly, all those incidents had taken place in the same day, at supply depots spread miles apart.

It was possible—barely. Such a feat could have been performed by a man with access to a high-powered motor-car. No one could prove Aurens had such access—but Hussein did; he owned several. And Hussein was now with Aurens—

It would still have taken incredible nerve and endurance. Kirkbride did not think he had the stamina to carry it off.

No one was paying any attention to him; he slipped out of the officers' mess with his own head spinning. There was only one thing of which he was certain now.

He wanted to be in at the kill. But to do that, he had to get himself attached to Allenby's staff within the next hour.

Impossible? Perhaps. But then again, had Aurens not said, as he took his leave, "We will meet again in Damascus"?

Kirkbride sat attentively at the general's side; they had not come by aeroplane after all, but by staff car, and so they had missed the battle.

All six hours of it.

Six hours! He could scarcely credit it. Even the Germans had fled in terror at the news of the army camped outside their strongholds; they had not even waited to destroy their own supplies. The general would not have believed it, had not French observers confirmed it. Allenby had mustered all of the General Staff of the Allied forces, and a convoy of staff cars had pushed engines to the breaking-point to convey them all to the city, but Kirkbride had the feeling that this was the mountain come to Mohammed, and not the other way around. He had been listening to the natives, and the word in their mouths,



spoken cautiously, but fervently, was that Aurens was Mohammed, or something very like him. The victories that Allah had granted were due entirely to his holiness, and not to his strategy. Strangest of all, this was agreed upon by Suni and Shiite, by Kurd and Afghani, by purest Circassian and darkest Egyptian, by Bedouin wanderer and Lebanese shopkeeper. There had been no such accord upon a prophet since the very days of Mohammed himself.

Allenby had convinced himself somehow that Aurens was going to simply, meekly, hand over his conquests to his rightful leader.

Kirkbride had the feeling that Allenby was not going to get what he expected.

Damascus was another Deraa, writ large. Only the Turkish holdings had been looted; the rest remained unmolested. There were no fires, no riots. High-spirited young warriors gamed and sported outside the city walls; inside, a stern and austere martial order prevailed. Even the hospital holding the wounded and sick Turkish prisoners was in as good order as might be expected, for a place that had been foul when the city was in Turkish hands. There was government; there was order. It was not an English order; organization was along tribal lines, rather than rank, to each tribe, a duty, and if they failed it, another was appointed to take it, to their eternal shame. But it was an order, and at the heart of it was the new Arab Government.

Allenby had laughed to hear that, at the gates of the city. As they were ushered into that government's heart, he was no longer laughing. There were fire brigades, a police force; the destitute were being fed by the holy men from out of the looted German stores, and the sick tended by the Turkish doctors out of those same stores. There were scavenger-gangs to clear away the dead, with rights to loot the bodies to make up for the noisome work. British gold became the new currency; there was a market already, with barter encouraged. Everywhere Kirkbride looked, there was strange, yet logical, order. And Allenby's face grew more and more grave.

Aurens permitted him, and the envoys of the other foreign powers, into his office, commandeered from the former Governor. The aides remained behind. "My people will see to us, and to them," Aurens said, with quiet authority. A look about the room, at the men in a rainbow of robes, with hands on knife-hilts, dissuaded arguments.

The door closed.

Kirkbride did not join with the others, drinking coffee and making sly comments about their guardians. He had the feeling, garnered from glances shared between dark faces, and the occasional tightening of a hand on a hilt, that all of these "barbarians" knew English quite well. Instead, he kept to himself, and simply watched and waited.

The hour of prayer came, and the call went up. All the men but one guarding them fell to praying; Kirkbride drew nearer to that one, a Circassian as blond as Aurens himself.

"You do not pray?" he asked, expecting that the man would understand.

And so he did. He shrugged. "I am Christian, for now." He cast his glance towards the closed door, and his eyes grew bright and thoughtful. "But—perhaps I shall convert."

Kirkbride blinked in surprise; not the least of the surprises of this day. "What was it that the caller added to the end of the chant?" he asked, for he had noted an extra sentence, called in a tone deeper than the rest.

The man's gaze returned to Kirkbride's face. "He said, `God alone is good, God alone is great, and He is very good to us this day, Oh people of Damascus.' "

At that moment, the door opened, and a much subdued delegation filed out of the door. Allenby turned, as Aurens followed a little into the antechamber, and stopped. His white robes seemed to glow in the growing dusk, and Kirkbride was astonished to see a hint of a smile on the thin, ascetic lips.

"You can't keep this going, you know," Allenby said, more weary than angry. "This isn't natural. It's going to fall apart."

"Not while I live, I think," Aurens said, in his crisp, precise English.

"Well, when you die, then," Allenby retorted savagely. "And the moment you're dead, we'll be waiting—just like the vultures you called us in there."

If anything, the smile only grew a trifle. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. There is wealth here, and wealth can purchase educations. In a few years, there will be men of the tribes who can play the politicians' game with the best of them. Years more, and there will be men of the tribes who look farther than the next spring, into the next century. We need not change, you know—we need only adopt the tools and weapons, and turn them to our own use. I would not look to cut up the East too soon, if I were you." Now he chuckled, something that surprised Kirkbride so much that his jaw dropped. "And in any event," Aurens concluded carelessly, "I intend to live a very long time."

Allenby swore under his breath, and turned on his heel. The rest, all but Kirkbride, followed.

He could not, for Aurens had turned that luminous blue gaze upon him again.

"Oxford, I think," the rich voice said.

He nodded, unable to speak.

The gaze released him, and turned to look out one of the windows; after a moment, Kirkbride recognized the direction. East.

Baghdad.

"I shall have need of Oxford men, to train my people in the English way of deception," the voice said, carelessly. "And the French way of double-dealing, and the German way of ruthlessness. To train them so that they understand, but do not become these things."

Kirkbride found his voice. "You aren't trying to claim that `your people' aren't double-dealing, deceitful, and ruthless, I hope?" he said, letting sarcasm color his words. "I think that would be a little much, even from you."

The eyes turned back to recapture his, and somewhere, behind the blue fire, there was a hint of humor.

"Oh, no," Aurens said, with gentle warmth. "But those are Arab deceptions, double-dealings, and ruthlessness. Clever, but predictable to another Arab; these things are understood all around. They have not yet learned the ways of men who call themselves civilized. I should like to see them well-armed, before Allah calls me again."

Kirkbride raised an eyebrow at that. "You haven't done anything any clever man couldn't replicate," he replied, half in accusation. "Without the help of Allah."

"Have I ever said differently?" Aurens traded him look for ironic look.

"I heard what happened before the battle." Aurens, they said, had ridden his snow-white stallion before them all. "In whose name do you ride?" he had called. "Like a trumpet," Kirkbride's informant had told him, as awed as if he had spoken of the Archangel Gabriel.

And the answer, every man joined in one roar of response. "In the name of Allah, and of Aurens."

Aurens only looked amused. "Ride with me to Baghdad." This had less the sound of a request than a command. "Ride with me to Yemen. Help me shape the world." Again, the touch of humor, softening it all. "Or at least, so much of it as we can. Inshallah. I have Stirling, I have some others, I should like you."

Kirkbride weighed the possibilities, the gains, the losses. Then weighed them against the intangible; the fire in the eyes, the look of eagles.

Then, once again, he looked Aurens full in the eyes; was caught in the blue fire of them, and felt that fire catch hold in his soul, outweighing any other thoughts or considerations.

Slowly, knowing that he wagered all on a single cast of the dice, he drew himself up to attention. Then he saluted; slowly, gravely, to the approval of every one of the robed men in that room.

"To Baghdad, and Yemen, Aurens," he said. "Inshallah."