

THE TALE OF
BAGHURR THE FOX

Chapter One

Call him Isma'il if you want.

That's what the king would have called him, and his ministers, and all the hangers-on at the Palace, too, if they'd ever had occasion to look him up in their book, which they didn't. But nobody called him that in real life, most of all his mother. She called him Baghurr, which means Fox in Tamazight, on account of the red hair he was born with. And because foxes are clever, and that's something she wanted for her boy.

The Isma'il part was because the people who kept the book wouldn't write his name in it if wasn't an Islamic name. Trust me on this. You can search the Qur'an all you want, Baghurr just isn't there, and if the king couldn't find her boy's name in his book, ipso facto profundo the boy didn't exist. That's the kind of thing that can work against you in a country where babies and everybody else are required to prove their bonafides at the drop of a policeman's hat. So his mother bit her tongue and said, Isma'il, and got on with her life.

Years later when the time came to register Baghurr's granddaughter, that girl hadn't been so lucky. Her mother put her foot down and insisted on a Berber name, and Thiyya grew up living the life of a ghost in the hotel where her mother worked. Not that I blame the mother, that woman had more than enough provocation to do what she did, and then some. The fact is, a lot of what I'm going to say here never would have even happened if she'd just been treated right.

Baghurr didn't care what the Book said about his name, he couldn't have read it anyway. All a merchant needed was his sums, and his father used the money that could have taught him to read to buy shares in a slave caravan from Timbuktu. But that was a long time ago and Baghurr's gift was words, not buying and selling. By the time I met him, he'd spent fifty years as a teller of stories at the plaza in Marrakech.

I'm pretty good with the different kinds of languages they use in North Africa or Uncle wouldn't have sent me, but I couldn't hold a candle to that old man. Besides the local version of Arabic, he spoke Modern Standard Arabic as well as any Arab,

Standard, or Modern or Otherwise, could speak it. His mother used Middle Atlas Tamazight around the house, so that was a third one. A lot of people look down on that as a Berber tongue, but she called it the Language of the Free People, which is what Berbers call themselves. Baghurr could get by in French and Spanish and Italian and German and English from all the years listening to tourists. And he was fluent in Tamazight Tarif, which is the Language the Free People speak in the Rif Mountains. What made me want to get him on the payroll was the things he overheard in those languages.

The problem with the payroll was that, ever since a slip-up in paperwork I'm not going to say any more about except that it got exploded all out of proportion, Uncle had turned judgmental where money and I were concerned, and the go-ahead on the old storyteller was still working its way through the corridors of power when the Argana Café blew up. It would have been better all around if those corridors had been shorter and brighter lit.

The night the Chinaman showed himself to me in the plaza in Marrakech, Baghurr was holding a horse egg in one hand and waving a stick with the other. The stick was to fight off the hill demons that live on the far side of the Crystal Mountains. He was telling the *Tale of Abdelilah and the Flying Horse*.

The balance of the world had fallen out of whack because the egg had been swiped from the nest of al-Buraq. You might have heard of al-Buraq. He was the horse that flew Mohammad up to Seventh Heaven for a look-see. How an eleven-year-old got hold of one of al-Buraq's eggs and what he did with it, was what the tale was about. In the world on the far side of the Crystal Mountains, flying horses hatch from eggs. In the world we live in, the egg came from an ostrich.

I was at the back of the crowd the night the Chinaman showed himself to me, and dressed like a Hararee Man so I'd blend in. That took some blending. Dark skin isn't all that common around there, no matter what they tried to tell you about Blackamoors in Shakespeare class. Somewhere during the Tale of Abdelilah and the Flying Horse, a pair of hippies shuffled up next to me. Hippies are something you don't see much of anymore, but there're always a few in the Jemaa el F'na on account of the marijuana that comes from the Rif Mountains. Usually I could smell it on them, but

these guys stank of tobacco and I knew right away they weren't the kind of hippy you used to see back home.

The plaza's been called the Jemaa el F'na for so long nobody remembers what the name means. Some say it's The Assembly of the Dead. Others will tell you it's the Place of Execution, and that made as much sense as anything, especially for the old storyteller. His great-great grandfather had his head chopped off right near where we were standing for telling the wrong kind of stories. In those days, the wrong kind of stories involved Islam. Or the king. They still do.

Nowadays the place is flooded with plainclothes cops, which explains the hippies. And the acrobats, for all I know. And the fortunetellers and men blowing flames out of their mouths, and the scribes with ancient, upright typewriters waiting to take a letter if you couldn't write one for yourself, which most people can't. Maybe it even explains the men jerking bored-looking Barbary apes on dog chains.

Gangs of young ladies in ankle-length hoodies raced around like Jawa Traders on the Desert Planet of Tatoonie. If you're a lady yourself, they'd slip up and paint designs on you with henna before you knew what's going on, then shake you down for money. If you weren't, they'd turn into prostitutes and do just about anything for money. At least, that's the word around the Jemaa el F'na, but who knows? Mostly, people say any kind of woman is a prostitute if she won't do like they expect. In the chaos department, the Jemaa el F'na is top of the line.

Some of the apes were fitted with disposable diapers in case a tourist got seized by the desire to have an ape on his head. Tables were piled with teeth to show off the talents of whatever dentist was lounging nearby with pliers. Chickens clucked beneath baskets in case you wanted to buy a chicken out from under a basket. Egyptian cobras were lying right in the open to satisfy the marked for people who wanted their pictures taken with an Egyptian cobra draped over their shoulders, and a lot of smaller snakes I didn't want to think about, except to know where they were so I wouldn't walk on them, were slithering around. But, mostly, there were cats.

Cats were all over the place, and they were the kind of cat you don't mess with. They were rangy and on edge and lived lives that were hard in every way a cat's life can be hard, except dogs. Dogs are unclean. If you associate with a dog, you have to go

through an extra layer of ablutions five times a day at the mosque, and who needs that? You don't see many dogs.

Lucky it's just five times a day. The original decree was fifty, but Muhammad got the sentence commuted when he showed up on the flying horse. So if you wonder why the Prophet is held in such high esteem, that's Number One on the list.

In the name of God the Most Merciful, God the Compassionate, God the All-Seeing . . . Baghurr said when he had the horse egg safely back in the nest and the world returned to balance. He always wound up with a few of the names of god. That's how people knew he'd come to the end story. . . . *God the Preserver, God the Nourisher, God the bringer of Justice.*

Some nights when he told the tale of the flying-horse and there weren't enough coins dropping into the brass bowl, the urge to toss in a feast at the end would seep into his thoughts. Abdelilah was a poor boy with a mother to support and al-Buraq wouldn't have missed an egg. Everybody knows horses can't count past three, and an omelet would have hit the spot. Those were the words Shaytaan whispered to hungry men and Baghurr put them out of his head.

But that night there were enough coins in the bowl that he could think about pastries. I'd seen to that. And I'd seen to it that he'd seen me see to it, too. Don't get me wrong, here. I can be as much of a tightwad as the next guy. More of a tightwad according to my boys, but the time was coming to walk over and introduce myself and I needed enough pre-installed warm-and-fuzzies so the old man would hear me out. It was one of the reasons I dressed up like a Hararee man. He'd had a soft spot in that direction since the day a Hararee man pulled him out of the sand dune that fell on his head.

Off in the distance, the song of a muezzin rang out. The first star was about to appear and the time had come for men to head over to the mosque and show off their righteousness. Ladies have to show their righteousness in private. Men are weak, and ladies, even the ones dressed in the bags that have been Allah-mode around the Jemaa el F'na for a thousand-and-some years, are too distracting. Where the ladies are concerned, god has to make house-calls.

Before the first muezzin was done, a second cut loose and, then, another until a whole cascade of muezzins picked up the chorus. Now I'm not trying to sound like I want to be counted among the Faithful because god would see right through something like that but, sometimes when those calls got to going, even us infidels would catch our breaths and listen for a while.

With all that happening, you wouldn't think a one-eyed Chinaman would attract much notice, and he didn't. But I spotted him right away and it made the hairs on my neck straighten out. He called himself Abu Sikin, which means Father of the Knife, but everybody I know just calls him Abu Stick-In which means the same thing, and because his favorite trick was cutting up Russians so they didn't die until next week. What worried me was the way he wasn't listening to the story. He just stood in back making sure I got a good look at him.

Chapter Two

There are things I'm going to say here that people will tell you, He can't know that. But that's just because they're ignorant of how I did it. I can't be revealing tradecraft here, so I'm not going to tell you, either, especially with that treason business following me around. That's a can of worms I'm not going to stir up no matter how hard you ask, so you might as well not.

And there're people, and plenty of them, who accuse me of spackling over the empty spaces when I don't know what really happened. There may be something to that, but most of what I'm going to say is truer than you'd guess. You just have to realize that knowing things was my job, and I was very good at it.

One thing that wasn't hard to know was why Mr Stick-In was showing himself to me at the Jemaa el F'na. Wu sent him. And if Wu was in on it, something big was going down. The fact that Wu had to be pulled out of retirement and brought all the way over from China, well that just went to show how big the something is.

That Chinaman is, maybe, the smartest person I ever met, smarter than any of you, smarter even than that champion card player from North Korea who disappeared out of a high-stakes canasta tournament in Hong Kong, which is another thing I'm not going to tell you about.

Stick-In was an odd duck to be flying with the likes of Wu. He was a Chinese Muslim from down by the Afghanistan border and, when the Soviets invaded, crossed over and turned into a Chinese jihadist. He was serious about the jihad thing and lost his eye to a fragment of Czechoslovakian steel in Kunar Province. When the Red Army pulled out, we supposed he'd head back home and sign up with the East Turkestan Independence Movement. Only he went to work with Wu, instead. Which isn't the same as working for Wu.

He took his orders direct from the people back in the People's Republic, which meant Wu could get diced up as quick as you or me, if somebody said the word. That's the thing about being a Chinaman, there's always somebody to say the word. As big a

deal as Wu turned into, he and I never were alone except those times in restaurants in Tel Aviv when he was recruiting me. Even then, somebody with a camera was at another table making sure I wasn't recruiting him.

At least that's what I thought the camera was for. Then Wu showed me the pictures, and there was a tape-recording, too, and none of it left any doubt in my mind I'd jump up and salute the moment Wu said the secret words.

Don't get me wrong, this wasn't a Manchurian Candidate deal where I'd turn into a zombie and climb into the rafters and shoot my own momma. It's just that Wu needed some way of letting me know when I my services would be required and, since I was heavy into Black Power and raised fists just then and Malcolm X was a hero of mine, saying Malcolm is dead was a surefire way to get my attention.

The problem was, Wu never said Malcolm is dead and, as the Israel days got smaller in my rearview mirror, I didn't have to pretend to be a patriotic American, anymore, I just naturally turned into one. I even had a speech worked out for the time when Wu came calling, something along the lines of, Lots of people do stupid things when they're kids, and the time has come for my bygones to stay gone by. And as far as those ancient-history pictures you got, you might as well try peddling them somewhere else, cause they ain't gone do you one bit of good with me. That's what I told myself I'd say, only I'd say it in a thicker ghetto accent than I use nowadays so he'd remember I had street creds.

He must have seen the time coming. Maybe that time always comes, I don't know, but when the day came to remind me of our agreement, the pictures he sent didn't have anything to do with me. They were of Spoons.

Spoons and I went way back. We grew up next to each other in the Projects and no matter how bad a day he'd had, he'd come in the kitchen and pull a handful of flatware out of the drawer and beat out rhythms right there on the countertop, which is how he came by his name.

We were just about as close as two Brothers could get who weren't actual brothers. We lipped off in class together. We hid out from the police together. We messed around with each other's sisters together, only we did the messing separately because that's how the sisters wanted it. When the time came, we turned into Ethiopian

Jews and migrated to Israel together. The only part we didn't do together was come back to East St Louis.

Spoons was in a restaurant in Haifa when Wu came in and told him about Malcolm being dead, or whatever words were de rigueur in his case. Spoons had worked out almost the exact speech I had, that was another way we were the same, and thanked Wu for his courtesies and explained how, now that he'd turned into a daddy and gotten his life together and was first chair in a fancy Israel orchestra, he'd put all that behind him and Wu would have to find somebody else to do his work.

The somebody turned out to be Abu Stick-In. And the work . . . well, I don't want to go too deep into this, only to say that when you're dealing with somebody like the Father of the Knife the phrase, Death by a Thousand Cuts, is not loose talk. The apartment manager found Spoons four days later, and he wasn't dead yet. The police found his boy Daryl hiding under the bed fourteen hours after that. He'd been there for the whole thing. The Israelis took care of Daryl, and Spoons' wife, too, they're good that way, but it was more than a year before that boy would talk again.

Now I'm not a revenge-minded kind of guy in ordinary situations. In ordinary situations I'm a turn-the-other-cheek kind of guy like my sister and that Jesus of hers she's always talking about. But where Mr Stick-In is concerned, if I ever find myself alone with him, I'll be bringing a gun to a knife fight, if you catch my drift.

I waited years for Wu to say the thing about Malcolm is dead, only he never did. Even after that business in Kenya and Tanzania when the embassies got blown up, he still didn't say it. The day came when he retired and I stopped worrying about having to turn traitor and went to living the life of the good citizen I already was.

And, then, along comes Stick-In making sure I knew the time had arrived to turn my coat against my fellow countrymen. And to remind me that if I'd changed my mind about any of it, no bed ever built would be big enough for Rachelle and the kids to hide under. You think you'd do different? You see how you handle it when somebody like the Father of the Knife takes a personal interest in you, then tell me what you did.

Chapter Three

When Baghurr figured he'd run through enough of the names of god, he gathered up the brass bowl, wrapped the horse egg in a piece of cloth, tucked the demon-swatting stick under his arm, walked over to a pastry cart and got in line behind a man with a full beard and long robes and an embroidered skullcap.

He was the kind guy you'd expect to see blowing up things instead of buying cakes for the curly-headed three-year-old in his arms. The boy was laughing and grabbing at a lemon tart while the lady behind the cart tied a string around a pink, cardboard box.

The man took the box, then laid another coin on the cart so he wouldn't have to touch the pastry lady handing it to her. Some guys imagine they honor their wives by acting like that. They even had a doctor at the embassy who wouldn't touch women. I'm not sure how that works in a diagnostic sort of way. Personally, I'd rather Rachelle didn't die because her physician was too committed to his wife to lay his hands on her, but that's just me.

The lady laughed and handed the kid the lemon tart, and his daddy kissed him and he got the giggles. That's the thing about these crazy terrorist bomber types, you don't think about them loving their children and being faithful to their wives. But a lot of them do, and some don't even blow stuff up.

The lady's name was Houda, and she was an old friend of Baghurr's and broke into the biggest grin when he stepped up to the cart. "Peace be unto all of you, My Brother," she said.

Strictly speaking, she wasn't supposed to park her cart in front of the Argana café, but her son was one of the waiters upstairs and she wanted to be near him. Besides, it was a good place to sell pastries. People would polish off a dish of snail soup at one of the food stands, then cap the evening with one or two of her little cakes. She made enough to pay Abdou the fat policeman not to bother her, and still come out ahead. Whatever else you say about the French who used to run things around there,

the pastries they brought with them were baraka. That's the word for blessing. To Houda, pretty much everything was baraka, which was god's blessing on her. And on everybody who knew her.

"And unto all of you, Peace," Baghurr said back. She was wearing a brown djellaba, and the old storyteller was glad to see it. The evening she'd shown up in white, he'd been horrified. White djellaba. White scarf. White socks. White shoes. Somebody had died dead.

"My Sister, what has happened?" he said.

"It is the man of the house." She'd been too upset to even say her husband's name.

She wore white for four months and ten days, which was her duty and, when the time came, went back to her old clothes. I had trouble thinking how that would work if Rachelle died. No matter what god had to say on the subject, four months and ten days wouldn't be enough for me. Forty years and ten days wouldn't be enough. Just thinking about Rachelle being dead makes me want to go outside and get more air.

"I have put aside some cakes for your granddaughter," Houda began setting pastries in one of her pink boxes. "Tariq spoke to her today."

"I did not know Thiyya had come to the plaza."

"She is desperate to get away from that hotel where her mother works. I am surprised she does not visit you more often."

"At the hotel she has a room of her own," Baghurr said. "A girl her age needs to be alone sometimes."

"Perhaps soon I, too, will have a granddaughter," Houda said.

"In god's name," Baghurr pulled out a handful of coins. Saying thank you in the name of god is one of the ways of working blessings into everyday life.

Widows need every dirham, but Houda waved the coins away. "Tariq has a fiancé. He will be married soon."

"His father would be proud."

"Truly," Houda said, "he was very pleased with his son." Her face was shining with tears. "My husband had a wonderful death. He did not suffer and he had seen

Tariq get such a good start in life. Times were good. The best of times to die. He was very proud of Tariq.”

“Indeed,” Baghurr said. Then, “did my grandson accompany Thiyya? Perhaps he . . .”

“No,” Houda said. “She was alone.”

“That is like her,” Baghurr laughed, “to venture out by herself.”

“That one is as headstrong as her mother.”

“It is the curse of the men of our family. All our women are headstrong.”

“They are all very beautiful as well,” Houda placed a couple of more cakes in the box. “Beautiful but skinny. Thiyya should take care when she goes out. The police cannot not protect those who do not exist.”

“The police will not protect her anyway.” Baghurr thought about Thiyya’s mother. And how, no matter how much bribe money the family paid, the police had done nothing. “Not if the wrong man takes an interest in her.”

“Times are different now. We have a new king.”

“I will seek my justice from god.”

“As all righteous men do. Still, when one is upon the earth, it is well to exist as a person. We live in modern times, now. Thiyya can keep her name and still have her birth registered.”

“It is complicated to record your birth when you are already a grown woman. When Thiyya cannot produce her papers the government will say she snuck into the country and put her in prison.”

“She is hardly a grown woman.”

“Try telling her that.”

“You can witness for her. You are her grandfather.”

“I cannot bear such witness before the law. My son was married to her mother, but he did not father her.”

“Still, you and Zoubida have been her grandparents all these years.”

“And she has been the granddaughter we always desired. But the officials will require more than our love to register her birth.”

“I have heard that the official in Zagora cannot read, therefore he signs whatever is placed before him.”

“This is common knowledge, My Sister,” Baghurr laughed. “It is also why he charges so much for his services.”

“If Thiyya were to marry, would she still need to have her birth registered?”

“I do not think so. Under the law, she would become the responsibility of her husband and the problem would cease to exist.”

“Then we must help her find a husband,” Houda laid more cakes in the box. “Men like their brides plump.” Then, “your grandson was not with her when she entered the café, but I still saw him today. He was accompanied by a pair of men. From the south, I think. They seemed very righteous.”

“Righteous?” Baghurr said.

“Perhaps too righteous. I do not trust men who are too righteous. They fear god over much.”

In the lights from the food stands a ring of men were clapping and cheering a willowy young woman dancing to wild drumming. Her face was veiled and her robes were flaring, and she clacked castanets as she laughed and whirled. And she was unusually tall. It was Hosni. She wasn't a girl at all and she was the sexiest woman on the plaza.

“Sometimes I think,” Baghurr said, “that the world has changed so much that I am no longer part of it.”

“As you said,” Houda grinned in the direction of the dancer, “judgment is for god.”

“Truly. And his blessings are for us.” He smiled at the cakes in the pink box.

“Perhaps he blesses you more than you know. It could be that the men who accompanied Youssef is a scholar. He looked scholarly. Perhaps he intends to make a scholar of your grandson.” At that, even Houda had to giggle. “Whoever those men are it is better, I think, that Youssef spend his time with him than with those boys who ride on their boards with wheels. And safer for the rest of us.”

“Safer, surely,” Baghurr laughed. “We are all a hand's-breadth from the Day of Reckoning when Youssef is on a skateboard. But those men would need to have the ear of god, himself, to make a scholar of that one. And his patience, as well.”

“God did not bless us all with the same gifts.”

“Indeed,” Baghurr said. “I had hoped Youssef would have the makings of a storyteller, but those are gifts I have never seen in him.”

“All things pass away,” she said at last. “Even the stories that your fathers told here. It is the way god makes room for the living.”

“Still, it is a pity,” Baghurr said. He wasn’t just thinking about the stories, he was thinking about her husband and how much she’d loved him.

“Your grandson may not have the gift of words,” she said, “but he has the gift of friends. That is a blessing, as well, and one a man may use to better himself.”

“I would not counsel the boy to use god’s gift in such a manner.”

“Everyone uses his friends in such a manner. It is one of the blessings of having friends.”

Baghurr knew she was right. She, too, had the gift of friends.

“Tariq has this gift,” she said, “and tourists at the Argana leave him much money in tips.”

“Your son is lucky to have employment where such a gift can be of use.”

“My son is blessed . . .”

“Truly, Baghurr said, “any son of yours would be blessed.”

“. . . but such blessings are not for Tariq alone. As I said, god makes room for the living. There is an opening for a new waiter.”

“I hear of most things,” Baghurr said, “yet I have not heard of such an opening. Many people would pay much money to know of this.”

“It will be a small opening. Part time, only, yet it might lead to more. But only if you approve. None of us wish to interfere with your plans to make Youssef into a teller of stories.”

“God interfered with those plans the day he fashioned Youssef. Who am I to set myself against god?”

“And your son? He does not wish Youssef to help at his shop? Surely Omar could benefit from the services of a . . .”

“It is not a matter of benefit. Tourists do not arrive in the numbers they once did and the shop of Omar can barely support Omar.”

“Then have Youssef come to the Argana during lunch tomorrow. The manager will be waiting for him.”

“Tariq has already set up this meeting?” Baghurr laughed.

“Only if you approve.” Houda set a two more pastries into the box. “For Thiyya. So she may become plump and find a husband.”

“Again, in god’s name.” Baghurr laid the coins on the cart. “No one can give away so much of her business and still remain in business.”

“They are not from me. They are god’s gift to Thiyya that I did not sell them today. Tomorrow they will no longer be good.” She slid the coins toward Baghurr.

“May he give you good things.”

“It is you who have given me good things.”

“Keep the pastries in his care,” she said, but they both knew he wouldn’t be able to. Abdou the Fat Policeman was standing behind him eyeing the box.

Chapter Four

“Do you think I’m too skinny?” Thiyya was making faces in the mirror. “People say I’m skinny.”

“Do not waste so much time worrying about what people say,” Zoubida told her.

Thiyya made an extra-horrible face to show what she thought about that advice.

“Careful you do not give yourself the evil eye,” Zoubida said.

“That’s what the Hand of Fatima is for,” Thiyya waggled the charm hanging around her neck. It was a flat little silver thing shaped like a hand with a blue stone in the middle. Just the ticket for slapping away evil eyes.

“It is backwards when you look at it in the mirror,” her grandmother laughed.

“You should turn it around before it pulls the evil eye into you.”

Thiyya studied her grandmother, trying to make out whether she was serious. With Zoubida it was hard to tell, sometimes. Then did like the old lady said. “The Captain thinks I’m too skinny.”

“Who is this Captain to say you are too fat or too skinny or too any other thing about you?”

“He comes to the hotel and we talk.”

“He must be very rich to speak to you in such a manner.”

“Not yet,” Thiyya batted her eyelashes at the mirror, “but he will be. He has a very large future in the army.”

“He said this about himself?”

“Everybody says this about him. The army pays him well to put a stop to smuggling.”

“He will be rich, no doubt. All these officers who put a stop smuggling arrive in beat-up Citroens and leave in brand-new Mercedes.”

“He doesn’t take bribes, if that’s what you mean. His job is to . . .”

“And, yet, so much smuggling continues to happen. What does this Captain want from you?”

“He wants to take me with him when he moves to his next assignment and marry me and someday I’ll be the wife of a great general.”

“He will take you with him, *then* he will marry you?”

Thiyya dropped her eyes. “He drives a Peugeot,” she said, not answering the question.

“He will take you away, that he will do. In a Mercedes, perhaps, but he will not marry you. He will find someone else, and he will take her away. And leave you where he found her.”

“He will not leave me. I’m his little acorn.”

“He calls you an acorn? Do you know what he means by that?”

“It’s the beret Mother gave me. She says berets make French ladies look sophisticated. The Captain says it makes me look like an acorn. Do you think I look like an acorn?” Thiyya made an acorn face at the mirror.

“Does this Captain know about your mother?”

“Everybody knows about Mother.”

“So, the man who wants to take you away before he marries you thinks your mother is a prostitute and you are an acorn?”

“Mother is an honorable woman.”

“Assuredly,” Zoubida said in a soft voice. “And an acorn does not fall far from the tree. And the daughter of a prostitute will be a prostitute.”

“He didn’t mean it that way.”

“Perhaps not, but that one will never marry you.”

Thiyya turned back to the mirror. Maybe her grandmother was right. It was just that she couldn’t see any other way out of the hotel.

“Do you want to marry this Captain?”

“What I want to,” Thiyya said, her heart dancing in her throat at the idea, “is to be a Frenchwoman. Frenchwomen smell good and have fine under things. That’s what Mother says when she picks up their rooms, Frenchwomen have very fine under things. I want to have fine under things.”

“You do not need a husband to have whatever you wish. You are a bright, spirited girl who is . . .”

“Too skinny.”

“Listen,” Zoubida grabbed Thiyya by the shoulders. “You are *not* too skinny.”

“If I’m not too skinny, why does the Captain want to send me to a place where I sit in a chair all day and drink cream until I’m fat enough to be the wife of an army officer?”

“This Captain wants a wife like that?”

Thiyya nodded.

“These are not the sort of wives to be respected. They are indolent women.” She let loose of Thiyya’s shoulder. Her granddaughter was so much like Yasmin, sometimes, she had to catch herself from crying. “You remind me of your mother,” Zoubida said.

“But not so beautiful.”

“Wait until you are a woman and ask me again. Not many women are as beautiful as your mother.”

“I’m a woman now,” Thiyya made another face. “If I wasn’t so skinny you would have noticed.”

“Tell me, Woman. Have you been woman enough to inform your mother that you mean to run away with this . . . Captain of yours?”

“I don’t need to. If she didn’t want me to run away with somebody, why did she give me this dumb name? How else can I even become a person with a name like Thiyya?”

“If we could get you registered, would you still want to run away with this Captain?”

“You don’t have enough money. I heard grandfather say that . . .”

“If we could get the money, would you still want to . . . ?”

“I’d still want to get out of that hotel.” Thiyya scowled at the hand of Fatima in the mirror. Her problem wasn’t keeping the evil eye away. Her problem was that nobody would tell her how to put it on somebody. “Will you teach me how to give the evil eye?” Thiyya said.

“If I could do that,” Zoubida laughed, “there are people who would be in serious . . . I have a list.”

“A list? You have an evil-eye list?”

“In my head,” Zoubida said. “You better be careful.”

“Maybe I should only use one eye. Nobody ever heard of giving somebody the evil eyes.” Thiyya closed an eye and made a hideous face at Zoubida. “Feel anything?”

“No,” Zoubida shook her head. “Try the other eye.”

Thiyya squinted so the other eye was aimed at Zoubida. “You’re not wearing a Hand of Fatima under your clothes are you? You should feel something.”

“No,” Zoubida laughed. “I am one of those modern women who think it is a good idea to wear their jewelry on the outside.”

“Are you sure you don’t feel anything?”

“You are not supposed to feel anything when the somebody puts the evil eye on you. You do not even know about it until something bad happens and you need to find out who did it.”

“If you don’t feel it when it happens how do you know who to . . . ?”

“You don’t. You just pick somebody you think might have . . .”

“You mean sometimes the person who gets blamed isn’t the one who did it?”

This put the evil-eye business in a whole new light. “Like Old Najat who sold vegetables behind the mosque? Everybody said she put the evil eye on little Hamdu when he caught rabies.”

Zoubida shook her head. If there was anybody who caught the evil eye, Najat was the one. After her husband died she didn’t have the money to pay the pharmacist for the free eye medicine the government provided, and had to scowl every time she came out in the sun, which made people nervous.

“Hamdu stole vegetables from her,” Thiyya said. “Everybody said that was the reason she . . .”

“Many people stole from Najat,” Zoubida said. “She could not see well, but Hamdu was the only one bitten by a dog.”

“So it was the evil eye that made the dog bite Hamdu?”

“It was the rabies that made the dog bite Hamdu.”

Thiyya was silent for a moment, then, “would somebody blame me for the evil eye if they got bitten by a dog?”

“They might,” Zoubida said.

“Then I need to learn how to do it,” Thiyya turned back to the mirror and began making faces. “If anybody blames me for the evil eye, I want to make sure they get it. Do you think somebody put the evil eye on Father?”

“I don’t think so,” Zoubida shook her head. “Her son hadn’t really been Thiyya’s father. He’d been married to her mother but, whoever the father had been, it hadn’t been him.

Yasmin had been the most devoted bride when Khalil brought her home from the High Atlas Mountains, and the most modest. Also, one of the most beautiful. Everybody said that. They still do, for that matter, and Zoubida and Baghurr had fallen for her right away. Then one day she carried some dough to the communal oven and never came back. She didn’t even return for the loaves and the baker had to set them aside until Zoubida showed up hours later.

A gang of boys saw what happened. A BMW was cruising the streets and Yasmin had been pulled inside. Women got manhandled in public all the time, and the boys didn’t think anything about it. But there’s nothing like a fancy car to attract attention and one of them remembered the license number.

It turned out to belong to a man named Maurice the Honeybeak. They called him that because of his exceptionally long and pointed nose, and because of the money he made off his connections at the Palace. One of the places he dipped his beak was the Club Oblivion up in Rabat where the children of other people with connections could buy things the Faithful aren’t supposed to have. Girls. Alcohol. Drugs, and Maurice made a lot of money supplying them. He kicked some of the profits upstairs to people with even better connections, which made justice very expensive to buy when Maurice the Honeybeak was involved.

But Khalil tried anyway. The whole family tried. They paid every dirham Baghurr’s father had left them from his slave-trading business. Then they sold their house and borrowed more money and made so much noise about what had happened that a Jewish-backed womens’-rights organization from Switzerland got involved. Not that it helped. Maurice the Honeybeak just smirked when the detectives asked what he’d done with Yasmin, and that was that.

Months later, she turned up at the Club Oblivion. When the police interviewed her, it turned out his beak wasn't the only thing he'd been dipping. Maurice had raped her for weeks, then forced to work as a dancer when he got bored. But everybody knew what dancers really did, and how could you rape a prostitute? The fact that she hadn't been a dancer until Maurice tired of her didn't cut any ice. Nor did the fact that the police knew that raping pretty girls was the Honeybeak's way of recruiting dancers. When they were finished talking to Yasmin, they returned her to him. The man had a business to run, after all. Then they issued a formal apology for all the trouble the investigation had caused him.

When Khalil found out where his wife was he headed up to Rabat to get her back. But he wasn't Maurice the Honeybeak, and he didn't have friends at the Palace, and nobody would let him inside. He caught a glimpse of her from the door, and that's the last he ever saw of her. She had her back to him and she was drinking champagne with an oily-looking man. Her hair was cut short like a boy's, she had bruises on her slender neck and on her arms, her dress was scooped so far down the back she was naked almost to the waist, it was she wasn't wearing anything underneath, and the man had his hand on the bare skin of the small of her back. When Khalil tried to call to her, the bouncers kicked him out.

When he refused to leave the street in front of the club, the bouncers called the cops. A two-hundred-and-thirty-pound sergeant hit him in the side of the head with a nightstick, then tossed him into the back of a van. Nobody ever saw him again. Not long after that, somebody from the Palace accused the Jewish womens'-rights organization of proselytizing for Jesus, and they were kicked out of the country.

A year later Baghurr discovered Yasmin scrubbing floors in a hotel down on the edge of the desert. Now that she had the baby she wasn't fit to work at the Club Oblivion and had to make do as a chambermaid.

"My daughter," Baghurr had said when he first saw her, "you are welcome in our home. But she'd been too ashamed of what had been done to her to ever return to Marrakech. Or to her real parents in the Mountains, for that matter. And she'd been much too pissed off to give her little girl an Islamic name.

Not that she wouldn't have been pissed off anyway, but the way the Club Oblivion stayed on the right side of the law pretty much did it for Islam as far as she was concerned. Every time a client was led into her room he'd read from a paper that created a temporary marriage. Half-an-hour later the marriage would expire in time for the next client to come in and read from the paper, and honor was preserved all around.

"If this is how our religion treats women," she told Baghurr, "my daughter does not need to be part of it." She gave Thiyya an ancient Free-Woman name and that had been that. Yasmin wasn't exactly family, but she was as headstrong as any other woman in Baghurr's life.