

## ALAMUT

(a novel)

By Vladimir Bartol

Every morning ibn Tahir set out for school with profound melan-choly in his heart. He looked at the novices—hadn't he been one of them himself just yesterday?—and it pained him to think that all of that was so far behind him and that he could never again be like them. An insurmountable wall rose up now between him and them. He would listen to their carefree chatter with a sad smile.

The sleepless nights eventually drained the freshness out of his cheeks. His face became sunken and his eyes gazed out absently and gloomily.

"Ibn Tahir, one of the ones who were in paradise," the soldiers would whisper to each other if they caught sight of him. Yesterday an inconspicuous student, today a powerful hero whose name caused young hearts to race. Once he had wished he could be this famous. Now he didn't care. Sometimes the admiring glances even bothered him. He wanted to get away from everybody, he wanted to escape into solitude, where he could be alone with his thoughts, and with Miriam.

Yes, Miriam was the great secret that separated him from all of these novices and even from his comrades. How many times had he dreamed of her, when he was fortunate enough to be able to fall asleep. He had the feeling she was ever-present, and because of this all company bothered him. Sometimes, when he was all alone, he would close his eyes. He would be back in the pavilion as he'd been that night, with Miriam bending over him. He saw her so vividly and registered all the details around her so precisely, that it was hellish torture not to be able to touch her. Indeed, he suffered no less than the unfortunate Farhad, separated from Shirin by Khosrow Parviz. Frequently he was afraid he might go mad...

By day Suleiman and Yusuf took some comfort in their fame. The first thing in the morning they would ride out of the castle at the head of their unit, and faces full of admiration would watch as they passed by.

But the irritability caused by their sleepless nights found its outlet precisely in the novices. Yusuf would roar like a lion when things weren't going as he wanted them to. But the novices soon found out that Suleiman's sharp, suppressed outbursts were far more dangerous. He often derided them for their mistakes. His laughter had the effect of a whiplash. Yusuf was generous with his explanations. He liked to be asked questions and then be able to answer them. All he needed was for them to show fear and respect when they approached him. But asking Suleiman a question was as good as risking a terrible slap in the face.

That is how they were by day. But as evening approached, they fell victim to fear and anxiety. They knew they were going to have to face another sleepless night.

Once Suleiman said to Yusuf and ibn Tahir, "I can't take this any longer. I'm going to go see Sayyiduna."

"Are you out of your mind?"

Yusuf was terrified.

"It doesn't work that way, Suleiman," ibn Tahir replied. "You've just got to bear with it, the same as us."

Suleiman flew into a rage.

"But I'm not made out of wood! I'm going to go see him and tell him everything. Either he'll give me some assignment that takes me back to paradise, or I'll strangle myself with my own hands!"

His eyes flashed like an animal's. He rolled them so that their whiteness showed and he gnashed his teeth furiously.

The next morning he asked Abu Soraka to permit him to go see Abu Ali.

"What's your business with him?"

"I've got to talk to him."

"What about? Some sort of complaint, maybe?"

"No. I want to ask him to give me an assignment."

"You'll get your assignment when the time comes, not by asking for it."

"But I have to speak to Abu Ali."

Abu Soraka noticed the crazed glint in his eyes.

Let them have a taste of their own cooking, he thought to himself.

"Since you're so insistent about this, I'll refer your request to the grand dai."

Abu Ali sensed something unpleasant when he heard that Suleiman wanted to speak with him.

“Wait,” he ordered Abu Soraka.

He went to Hasan and asked his advice.

“Talk to him,” Hasan said. “Then report back to me. We may learn something really interesting.”

Abu Ali waited for Suleiman in the great assembly hall. They were alone in the huge room.

“What’s on your mind, my dear Suleiman, that you wish to speak to me?”

Suleiman lowered his eyes.

“I wanted to ask you, reverend grand dai, to take me to see Sayyiduna.”

Abu Ali was clearly nonplussed.

“Of all the things to ask for! Sayyiduna labors from morning to night for our well-being. Do you want to steal time away from him? I’m his deputy. Everything you wanted to tell him you can tell me now.”

“It’s difficult...He’s the only one who has the cure I need.”

“Speak up. I’ll relay everything to him.”

“I can’t stand it anymore. I want an assignment that will open the gates of paradise to me again.”

Abu Ali reflexively took a step backward. For a moment he caught Suleiman’s eyes. They were burning like fire.

“You’re mad, Suleiman. Do you realize that what you’re asking is practically rebellion? And that rebellion is punishable by death?”

“Better to die than suffer like this.”

Suleiman had murmured these words, but Abu Ali understood him.

“Go now. I’ll give this some thought. There may be help waiting for you sooner than you think.”

When Abu Ali returned, Hasan looked at him inquiringly.

“He wants you to give him an assignment so he can go back to para-dise. He says he can’t bear it anymore.”

Hasan smiled.

“I wasn’t mistaken,” he said. “The poison and the gardens are having their effect. Soon it will be time for the final experiment.”

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Hasan raised his arm as a sign that he was about to speak. Then, in a clear voice, he asked Abu Jafar, “Who are you, stranger? And what have you come to Alamut for?”

“Sir! I am Captain Abu Jafar, son of Abu Bakr. I come on the orders of my master, His Excellency the emir Arslan Tash, who has been sent by His Majesty, the Glory and Grace of the state, the omnipotent sultan Malik Shah, to wrest back from you the fortress of Alamut, which you seized by dishonest means. His Majesty views you as his subject. He orders you to turn the castle over to his general, the emir Arslan Tash, within three days. My master guarantees safe passage for you and your men... However, if you do not fulfill this order, His Excellency will view you as an enemy of the state. My master will pursue you relentlessly until he utterly destroys you. For the grand vizier himself, His Excellency Nizam al-Mulk, is approaching Alamut with a great army, and he will show no mercy toward the Ismailis. This is what my master has commanded me to tell you.”

At these final threats his voice shook slightly.

Hasan jeered at him. In his response he mocked the other’s solemn delivery.

“Abu Jafar, son of Abu Bakr! Tell your master, His Excellency the emir Arslan Tash, this: Alamut is well prepared to receive him. However, we are in no way his enemies. Still, if he keeps clattering around these parts with his weapons, the same thing could happen to him as happened to the commander of his vanguard. His head will be stuck on a stake and planted on that tower over there.”

Abu Jafar’s face flushed red. He came forward and reached for his sword.

“You dare shame my master? Impostor! Egyptian hireling! Do you know there are thirty thousand of us outside this castle?”

The Ismailis who heard this answer started rattling their weapons. A wave of indignation spread through their ranks.

Hasan remained totally cool and asked, “Is it the custom among the sultan’s men to offend foreign leaders?”

“No. Our custom is to take an eye for an eye.”

“You said something about there being thirty thousand men outside the castle. Tell me, have these men come to catch butterflies or to hear the new prophet?”

“If the Ismailis are butterflies, then they’ve come to catch butterflies. If there’s some new prophet close by here, it’s news to me.”

“So you haven’t heard anything about Hasan ibn Sabbah, the master of heaven and earth? Whom Allah has given the power to open the gates of paradise to the living?”

“I’ve heard about some Hasan ibn Sabbah who is an infidel leader. If my senses don’t deceive me, I’m standing in front of him now. But I don’t know anything about his being master of heaven and earth, or about Allah giving him that kind of power.”

Hasan sought out Suleiman and Yusuf with his eyes. He called to them. They left their positions within the ranks and went toward the steps that led to the upper terrace. He asked them, “Can the two of you swear by all the prophets and martyrs that you have been in paradise, alive, whole, and fully conscious?”

“We can, Sayyiduna.”

“Swear it.”

They so swore, clearly and distinctly.

Abu Jafar was tempted to laugh. But such firm faith and sincere conviction showed in their voices that a shiver went down his spine. He looked at his two aides and could tell from their faces they were happy not to be in his shoes. Clearly he had let things take a wrong turn. Now he spoke with much less firmness than before.

“Sir, I haven’t come here to engage in religious disputes with you. I have brought you the order of His Excellency, my master the emir Arslan Tash, and I await your response.”

“Why are you being evasive, friend? Don’t you care whether you’re fighting for a true prophet or not?”

“I’m not fighting for any prophet. I simply serve His Majesty.”

“Those are exactly the words of the men who fought in the service of other rulers against the Prophet. Which is why they met with destruction.”

Abu Jafar stubbornly looked at the ground. He remained silent.

Hasan turned toward Yusuf and Suleiman. They stood as if bolted to the foot of the steps, gazing at him with gleaming eyes. He descended partway down the steps toward them, reached inside his cloak, and pulled out a bracelet.

“Do you recognize this bracelet, Suleiman?”

Suleiman went as white as a sheet. Froth gathered at the corners of his mouth. In a voice quivering with mindless bliss, he murmured, “I do, master.”

“Go and return it to its owner.”

Suleiman’s knees went weak. Hasan reached inside his cloak again. This time he brought forth a pellet, which he handed Suleiman.

“Swallow it,” he ordered.

Then he turned to Yusuf.

“Would you be happy, Yusuf, if I sent you along with Suleiman?”

“Oh... Sayyiduna.”

Yusuf’s eyes shone with happiness. Hasan handed him a pellet too.

The emir’s emissaries watched this scene with growing trepidation. Soon they noticed both youths getting a remote, absent look in their eyes, as though they were looking at a completely foreign world that was invisible to the others.

Abu Jafar asked timidly, “What does all this mean, sir?”

“You’ll see. I’m telling you, open your eyes. Because what is about to happen has never before happened in the history of mankind.”

Then he solemnly straightened up and spoke in a deep voice.

“Yusuf! Zuleika is waiting for you in paradise. Do you see that tower? Run to the top of it and jump off. You’ll fall into her embrace.”

Yusuf’s face shone with happiness. From the moment he swallowed the pellet, he was at peace again as he had not been for a long time. A marvelous, blissful peace. Everything was exactly as it had been when he and his two friends had originally set out for paradise. As soon as he registered Hasan’s command, he turned on his heels and raced toward the tower with the doves.

Then, amidst a tomblike silence, Hasan turned to face Suleiman.

“Do you have your dagger with you, Suleiman?”

“Here it is, Sayyiduna.”

The three emissaries instinctively reached for their sabers. But Hasan shook his head and smiled at them.

“Take the bracelet! Thrust the dagger into your heart, and in just a moment you’ll be able to return it to its owner.”

Suleiman clutched with wild joy at the bracelet. He held it to his chest, while with the other hand he plunged the dagger into his heart. Still radiant with happiness, with a sigh of relief he collapsed to the ground at the foot of the steps.

The three emissaries and everyone else who was standing close by froze in horror.

Pale and with a tired smile, Hasan pointed toward the body.

“Go take a close look,” he told the emissaries.

After some hesitation, they obeyed. The dagger was planted up to the hilt in the youth’s body. A thin stream of blood soaked his white clothing. Even in death his face was still radiant with bliss.

Abu Jafar drew his hand across his eyes.

“O all-merciful Allah!” he moaned.

Hasan nodded to a eunuch to spread a coat over the body. Then he turned and pointed toward the tower.

“Look up there!”

Out of breath, Yusuf had just then reached the top of the tower. His heart was pounding in his chest.

Dumbfounded, the guards on the tower platform remained motionless. He raced up onto the battlements. Below he saw a sea of palaces, towers and cupolas, all in the most vivid colors.

“I’m an eagle. At last, I’m an eagle again,” he whispered.

He waved his arms and actually felt that he’d grown wings. With a powerful leap he soared into the abyss.

His heavy body crashed to the ground with a dull thud.

The horses standing nearby neighed wildly and backed off. They jostled with each other and caused disorder in the ranks. Their riders had a hard time calming them down.

“Go on over and have a look at the body,” Hasan told the emissaries.

“We’ve seen enough,” Abu Jafar replied. His voice was still as faint as before.

“Well then, Abu Jafar. Report what you’ve seen here as my response to your master. And be sure to tell him this: though your army may number thirty thousand men, no two of them are the equal of these. As for the threat of the grand vizier, tell him I know something very important about him that he’ll only find out six or possibly even twelve days from now. When that happens, make sure he remembers me and my message... Farewell!”

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“This morning Yusuf and Suleiman helped to fray the nerves of the sultan’s army that’s got us surrounded.”

She looked at him as though she were trying to read his innermost thoughts.

“Did you kill them?”

“No, they killed themselves. And they were happy to do it.”

“You’re a cruel beast. What happened?”

He related the story. She listened to him with a mixture of horror and disbelief.

“And you didn’t feel a thing when you sacrificed two human beings who were utterly devoted to you?”

She could see that this was difficult for him and that he was on the defensive.

“You wouldn’t understand. What I’ve begun, I have to finish. But when I gave the fedayeen the command, I had to shudder. Something inside me said, ‘If there’s a power above us, it won’t permit this. Either the sun will go out or the earth will shake. The fortress will collapse and bury you and your whole army . . .’ I’m telling you, I was trembling in my heart, like a child trembles before ghosts. I expected at least some little sign. It’s the truth, if just the slightest thing had stirred, if just then a cloud, for instance, had suddenly blocked out the sun, or if there had been a gust of wind, I would have reconsidered. Even after it was over, I was expecting a blow. But the sun continued to shine down all the same on me, on Alamut, and on the two dead bodies lying before of me. And this is what I thought: either there is no power above us, or else it’s supremely indifferent to everything that happens

down here. Or, it's favorably inclined toward what I'm doing. It was then I realized that somewhere secretly I still believed in a divinity. But that divinity bore no resemblance to the one of my youth. It was like the world itself, evolving in thousands of contradictions, yet firmly fettered to three dimensions. Limitless within its limits. Vast chaos inside a glass beaker. A terrible, grimacing dragon. And I knew at once that I had been serving it all my life."

He looked past her with his eyes wide open, as though he were looking at indescribable wonders.

Insane devil, Miriam thought at that moment.

"Where is ibn Tahir?"

Hasan lowered his eyes.

"Did you send him to your 'bosom foe'?"

Now he fixed his eyes on her, his gaze taking her in completely.

"Didn't you once say that you didn't believe in anything in the world and that you were afraid of nothing? Where is your strength, now that you have to endure the actions whose weight I bear? You have a heart for the small things, but sometimes you need one for the big things too."