The Confusion

Neal Stephenson

Barbary Coast

October 1689

HE WAS MERELY AWAKENED, but detonated out of an uncommonly long and repetitive dream. He could not remember any of the details of the dream now that it was over. But he had the idea that it had entailed much rowing and scraping, and little else; so he did not object to being roused. Even if he had been of a mind to object, he'd have had the good sense to hold his tongue, and keep his annoyance well-hid beneath a simpering merry-Vagabond façade. Because what was doing the waking, today, was the most tremendous damned noise he'd ever heard-it was some godlike Force not to be yelled at or complained to, at least not right away.

Cannons were being fired. Never so many, and rarely so large, cannons. Whole batteries of siege-guns and coastal artillery discharging en masse, ranks of 'em ripple-firing along wall-tops. He rolled out from beneath the barnacle-covered hull of a beached ship, where he had apparently been taking an afternoon nap, and found himself pinned to the sand by a downblast of bleak sunlight. At this point a wise man, with experience in matters military, would have belly-crawled to some suitable enfilade. But the beach all round him was planted with hairy ankles and sandaled feet; he was the only one prone or supine.

Lying on his back, he squinted up through the damp, sand-caked hem of a man's garment: a loose robe of open-weave material that laved the wearer's body in a gold glow, so that he could look directly up into the blind eye of the man's penis-which had been curiously modified. Inevitably, he lost this particular stare-down. He rolled back the other way, performing one and a half uphill revolutions, and clambered indignantly to his feet, forgetting about the curve of the hull and therefore barking his scalp on a phalanx of barnacles. Then he screamed as loud as he could, but no one heard him. He didn't even hear himself. He experimented with plugging his ears and screaming, but even then he heard naught but the sound of the cannons.

Time to take stock of matters-to bring the situation in hand. The hull was blocking his view. Other than it, all he could see was a sparkling bay, and a stony break-water. He strode into the sea, watched curiously by the man with the mushroom-headed yard, and, once he was out knee-deep, turned around. What he saw then made it more or less obligatory to fall right on his arse.

This bay was spattered with bony islets, close to shore. Rising from one of them was a squat round fortress that (if he was any judge of matters architectural) had been built at grand expense by Spaniards in desperate fear of their lives. And apparently those fears had been well founded because the top of that fort was all fluttery with green banners bearing silver crescent moons. The fort had three tiers of guns on it

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(more correctly, the fort was three tiers of guns) and every one of 'em looked, and sounded, like a sixtypounder, meaning that it flung a cannonball the size of a melon for several miles. This fort was mostly shrouded in powder-smoke, with long bolts of flame jabbing out here and there, giving it the appearance of a thunderstorm that had been rammed and tamped into a barrel.

A white stone breakwater connected this fort to the mainland, which, at first glance, impressed him as a sheer stone wall rising forty or feet from this narrow strip of muddy beach, and crowded with a great many more huge cannons, all being fired just as fast as they could be swabbed out and stuffed with powder.

Beyond the wall rose a white city. Being as he was at the base of a rather high wall, he wouldn't normally expect to be able to see anything on the opposite side thereof, save the odd cathedral-spire poking out above the battlements. But this city appeared to've been laboriously spackled onto the side of a precipitous mountain whose slopes rose directly from the high-tide mark. It looked a bit like a wedge of Paris tilted upwards by some tidy God who wanted to make all the shit finally run out of it. At the apex, where one would look for whatever crowbar or grapple the hypothetical God would've used to accomplish this prodigy, was, instead, another fortress-this one of a queer Moorish design, surrounded with its own eight-sided wall that was, inevitably, a-bristle with even more colossal cannons, as well as mortars for heaving bombs out to sea. All of those were being fired, too-as were all of the guns spraying from the several additional fortresses, bastions, and gun-platforms distributed around the city's walls.

During rare intervals between the crushing thuds of the sixtypounders, he could hear peppery waves of pistol- and musket-fire rolling around the place, and now (beginning to advert on smaller things) he saw a sort of smoky, crowded lawn growing out of the wallthe tops-save instead of grass-blades this lawn was made up of men. Some were dressed in black, and some in white, but most wore more colorful costumes: baggy white trousers belted with brilliantly hued swathes of silk, and brightly embroidered vests-frequently, several such vests nested-and turbans or red cylindrical hats. Most of those who were dressed after this fashion had a pistol in each hand and were firing them into the air or reloading.

The man with the outlandish johnson-swarthy, with wavy black hair in a curious 'do, and a knit skullcap-hitched up his robe, and sloshed out to see if he was all right. For he still had both hands clamped over the sides of his head, partly to stanch the bleeding of the barnacle-gashes, and partly to keep the sound from blowing the top of his skull out to sea. The man peered down and looked into his eyes and moved his lips. The look on his face was serious, but ever so slightly amused.

He reached up and grabbed this fellow's hand and used it to haul himself up to his feet. Both men's hands were so heavily callused that they could practically catch musket-balls out of the air, and their knuckles were either bleeding, or else recently scabbed over.

He had stood up because he wanted to see what was the target of all of this shooting, and how it could possibly continue to exist. A fleet of three or four dozen ships was

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arrayed in the harbor, and (no surprise here) they were all firing their guns. But the ones that looked like Dutch frigates were not firing at the ones that looked like heathen galleys, nor vice versa, and none of them seemed to be firing at the vertiginous white city. All of the ships, even the ones that were of European design, flew crescent-moon banners.

Finally his eye settled on one ship, which was unique in that she was the only vessel or building in sight that was not vomiting smoke and spitting flame in all directions. This one was a galley, very much in the Mohametan style, but extraordinarily fine, at least to anyone who found whorish decoration appealing-her non-functioning bits were a mess of gold-leafed gewgaws that glowed in the sun, even through drifting banks of powder-smoke. Her lateen sail had been struck and she was proceeding under oar-power, but in a stately manner. He found himself examining the movements of her oars just a bit too closely, and admiring the uniformity of the strokes more than was healthy for a Vagabond in his right mind: leading to the questions, was he still a Vagabond, and was he in his right mind? He recalled-dimly-that he had lived in Christendom during one part of his sorry life, and had been well advanced in the losing of his mind to the French Pox-but he seemed all right now, save that he couldn't recall where he was, how he'd gotten there, or anything at all of recent events. And the very meaning of that word "recent" was called into question by the length of his beard, which reached down to his stomach.

The intensity of the cannonade waxed, if such a thing were possible, and reached a climax as the gold-plated galley drew up alongside a stone pier that projected into the harbor not awfully far away. Then, all of a sudden, the noise stopped.

"What in Christ's name-" he began, but the rest of his utterance was drowned out by a sound that-compared to hundreds of cannons firing at once-made up in shrillness what it lacked in volume. Listening to it in amazement, he began to detect certain resemblances between it and musick. Rhythm was there, albeit of an overly complicated and rambunctious nature, and melody, too, though it was not cast in any civilized mode, but had the wild keening intonations of Irish tunes-and then some. Harmony, sweetness of tone, and other qualities normally associated with musick, were absent. For these Turks or Moors or whatever they were had no interest in flutes, viols, theorbos, nor anything else that made a pleasing sound. Their orchestra consisted of drums, cymbals, and a hideous swarm of giant war-oboes hammered out of brass and fitted with screeching, buzzing reeds, the result sounding like nothing so much as an armed assault on a belfry infested with starlings.

"I owe an 'umble apology to every Scotsman I've ever met," he shouted, "for it isn't true, after all, that their music is the most despicable in the world." His companion cocked an ear in his direction but heard little, and understood less.

Now, essentially all of the city was protected within that wall, which shamed any in Christendom. But on this side of it there were various breakwaters, piers, gun-emplacements, and traces of mucky beach, and everything that was capable of bearing a man's weight, or a horse's, was doing so-covered by ranks of men in divers magnificent and outlandish uniforms. In other words, all the makings of a parade

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were laid out here. And indeed, after a lot of bellowing back and forth and playing of hellish musicks and firing of yet more guns, various important Turks (he was growingly certain that these were Turks) began to ride or march through a large gate let into the mighty Wall, disappearing into the city. First went an impossibly magnificent and fearsome warrior on a black charger, flanked by a couple of kettledrum-pounding "musicians." The beat of their drums filled him with an unaccountable craving to reach out and grope for an oar.

"That, Jack, is the Agha of the Janissaries," said the circumcised one.

This handle of "Jack" struck him as familiar and, in any case, serviceable. So Jack he was.

Behind the kettledrums rode a graybeard, almost as magnificent to look at as the Agha of the Janissaries, but not so heavily beweaponed. "The First Secretary," said Jack's companion. Next, following on foot, a couple of dozen more or less resplendent officers ("the aghabashis") and then a whole crowd of fellows with magnifi- cent turbans adorned with first-rate ostrich plumes-"the bolukbashis," it was explained.

Now it had become plain enough that this fellow standing next to Jack was the sort who never tired of showing off his great knowledge, and of trying to edify lowlives such as Jack. Jack was about to say that he neither wanted nor needed edification, but something stopped him. It might've been the vague, inescapable sense that he knew this fellow, and had for quite a while-which, if true, might mean that the other was only trying to make conversation. And it might've been that Jack didn't know quite where to begin, language-wise. He knew somehow that the bolukbashis were equivalent to captains, and that the aghabashis were one rank above the bolukbashis, and that the Agha of the Janissaries was a General. But he was not sure why he should know the meanings of such heathen words. So Jack shut up, long enough for various echelons of odabashis (lieutenants) and vekilhardjis (sergeants-major) to form up and concatenate themselves onto the end of the parade. Then diverse hocas such as the salt-hoca, customs-hoca, and weights-and-measures-hoca, all following the hoca-in-chief, then the sixteen cavuses in their long emerald robes with crimson cummerbunds, their white leather caps, their fantastickal upturned moustaches, and their red hobnailed boots tromping fearsomely over the stones of the quay. Then the kadis, muftis, and imams had to do their bit. Finally a troop of gorgeous Janissaries marched off the deck of the golden galley, followed by a solitary man swathed in many yards of chalk-white fabric that had been gathered by means of diverse massive golden jeweled brooches into a coherent garment, though it probably would've fallen off of him if he hadn't been riding on a white war-horse with pink eyes, bridled and saddled with as much in the way of silver and gems as it could carry without tripping over the finery.

"The new Pasha-straight from Constantinople!"

"I'll be damned-is that why they were firing all those guns?"

"It is traditional to greet a new Pasha with a salute of fifteen hundred guns."

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"Traditional where?"

"Here."

"And here is-?"

"Forgive me, I forget you have not been right in the head. The city that rises up on yonder mountain is the Invincible Bastion of Islam- the Place of Everlasting Vigil and Combat against the Infidel-the Whip of Christendom, Terror of the Seas, Bridle of Italy and Spain, Scourge of the Islands: who holds the sea under her laws and makes all nations her righteous and lawful prey."

"Bit of a mouthful, isn't it?"

"The English name is Algiers."

"Well, in Christendom I have seen entire wars prosecuted with less expenditure of gunpowder than Algiers uses to say hello to a Pasha-so perhaps your words are not mere bravado. What language are we speaking, by the way?"

"It is called variously Franco, or Sabir, which in Spanish means 'to know.' Some of it comes from Provençe, Spain, and Italy, some from Arabic and Turkish. Your Sabir has much French in it, Jack, mine has more Spanish."

"Surely you're no Spaniard-!"

The man bowed, albeit without doffing his skullcap, and his forelocks tumbled from his shoulders and dangled in space. "Moseh de la Cruz, at your service."

" 'Moses of the Cross?' What the hell kind of name is that?"

Moseh did not appear to find it especially funny. "It is a long story-even by your standards, Jack. Suffice it to say that the Iberian Peninsula is a complicated place to be Jewish."

"How'd you end up here?" Jack began to ask; but he was interrupted by a large Turk, armed with a bull's penis, who was waving at Jack and Moseh, commanding them to get out of the surf and return to work-the siesta was finis and it was time for trabajo now that the Pasha had ridden through the Beb and entered into the cité.

The trabajo consisted of scraping the barnacles from the hull of the adjacent galley, which had been beached and rolled over to expose its keel. Jack, Moseh, and a few dozen other slaves (for there was no getting round the fact that they were slaves) got to work with various rude iron tools while the Turk prowled up and down the length of the hull brandishing that ox-pizzle. High above them, behind the wall, they could hear a sort of rolling fusillade wandering around the city as the parade continued; the thump of the kettledrums, and the outcry of the siege-oboes and assault-bassoons was, mercifully, deflected heavenwards by the city walls.

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"It is true, I think-you are cured."

"Never mind what your Alchemists and Chirurgeons will tell you-there is no cure for the French Pox. I'm having a brief interval of sanity, nothing more."

"On the contrary-it is claimed, by certain Arab and Jewish doc- tors of great distinction, that the aforesaid Pox may be purged from the body, completely and permanently, if the patient is suffered to run an extremely high fever for several consecutive days."

"I don't feel good, mind you, but I don't feel feverish."

"But a few weeks ago, you and several others came down with violent cases of la suette anglaise."

"Never heard of any such disease-and I'm English, mind you."

Moseh de la Cruz shrugged, as best a man could when hacking at a cluster of barnacles with a pitted and rusted iron hoe. "It is a wellknown disease, hereabouts-whole neighborhoods were laid low with it in the spring."

"Perhaps they'd made the mistake of listening to too much musick-?"

Moseh shrugged again. "It is a real enough disease-perhaps not as fearsome as some of the others, such as Rising of the Lights, or Ring-Booger, or the Laughing Kidney, or Letters-from-Venice . . ."

"Avast!"

"In any event, you came down with it, Jack, and had such a fever that all the other tutsaklars in the banyolar were roasting kebabs over your brow for a fortnight. Finally one morning you were pronounced dead, and carried out of the banyolar and thrown into a wain. Our owner sent me round to the Treasury to notify the hoca el-pencik so that your title deed could be marked as 'deceased,' which is a necessary step in filing an insurance claim. But the hoca el-pencik knew that a new Pasha was on his way, and wanted to make sure that all the records were in order, lest some irregularity be discovered during an audit, which would cause him to fall under the bastinado at the very least."

"May I infer, from this, that insurance fraud is a common failing of slave-owners?"

"Some of them are completely unethical," Moseh confided. "So I was ordered to lead the hoca el-pencik back to the banyolar and show him your body-but not before I was made to wait for hours and hours in his courtyard, as midday came and went, and the hoca el-pencik took a siesta under the lime-tree there. Finally we went to the banyolar-but in the meantime your wagon had been moved to the burial-ground of the Janissaries."

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"Why!? I'm no more a Janissary than you are."

"Sssh! So I had gathered, Jack, from several years of being chained up next to you, and hearing your autobiographical ravings: stories that, at first, were simply too grotesque to believe-then, entertaining after a fashion-then, after the hundredth or thousandth repetition-"

"Stay. No doubt you have tedious and insufferable qualities of your own, Moseh de la Cruz, but you have me at a disadvantage, as I cannot remember them. What I want to know is, why did they think I was a Janissary?"

"The first clew was that you carried a Janissary-sword when you were captured."

"Proceeds of routine military corpse-looting, nothing more."

"The second: you fought with such valor that your want of skill was quite overlooked."

"I was trying to get myself killed, or else would've shown less of the former, and more of the latter."

"Third: the unnatural state of your penis was interpreted as a mark of strict chastity-"

"Correct, perforce!"

"-and assumed to've been self-administered."

"Haw! That's not how it happened at all-"

"Stay," Moseh said, shielding his face behind both hands.

"I forgot, you've heard."

"Fourth: the Arabic numeral seven branded on the back of your hand."

"I'll have you know that's a letter V, for Vagabond."

"But sideways it could be taken for a seven."

"How does that make me a Janissary?"

"When a new recruit takes the oath and becomes yeni yoldash, which is the lowliest rank, his barrack number is tattooed onto the back of his hand, so it can be known which seffara he belongs to, and which bash yoldash is responsible for him."

"All right-so 'twas assumed I'd come up from barracks number seven in some Ottoman garrison-town somewhere."

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"Just so. And yet you were clearly out of your mind, and not good for much besides pulling on an oar, so it was decided you'd remain tutsaklar until you died, or regained your senses. If the former, you'd receive a Janissary funeral."

"What about the latter?"

"That remains to be seen. As it was, we thought it was the former. So we went to the high ground outside the city-walls, to the burialground of the ocak-"

"Come again?"

"Ocak: a Turkish order of Janissaries, modeled after the Knights of Rhodes. They rule over Algiers, and are a law and society unto themselves here."

"Is that man coming over to hit us with the bull's penis a part of this ocak?"

"No. He works for the corsair-captain who owns the galley. The corsairs are yet another completely different society unto themselves."

After the Turk had finished giving Jack and Moseh several bracing strokes of the bull's penis, and had wandered away to go beat up on some other barnacle-scrapers, Jack invited Moseh to continue the story.

"The hoca el-pencik and several of his aides and I went to that place. And a bleak place it was, Jack, with its countless tombs, mostly shaped like half-eggshells, meant to evoke a village of yurts on the Transoxianan Steppe-the ancestral homeland for which Turks are forever homesick-though, if it bears the slightest resemblance to that burying-ground, I cannot imagine why. At any rate, we roamed up and down among these stone yurts for an hour, searching for your corpse, and were about to give up, for the sun was going down, when we heard a muffled, echoing voice repeating some strange incantation, or prophecy, in an outlandish tongue. Now the hoca elpencik was on edge to begin with, as this interminable stroll through the graveyard had put him in mind of daimons and ifrits and other horrors. When he heard this voice, coming (as we soon realized) from a great mausoleum where a murdered agha had been entombed, he was about to bolt for the city gates. So were his aides. But as they had with them one who was not only a slave, but a Jew to boot, they sent me into that tomb to see what would happen."

"And what did happen?"

"I found you, Jack, standing upright in that ghastly, but delightfully cool space, pounding on the lid of the agha's sarcophagus and repeating certain English words. I knew not what they meant, but they went something like this: 'Be a good fellow there, sirrah, and bring me a pint of your best bitter!' "

"I must have been out of my head," Jack muttered, "for the light lagers of Pilsen are much better suited to this climate."

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"You were still daft, but there was a certain spark about you that I had not seen in a year or two-certainly not since we were traded to Algiers. I suspected that the heat of your fever, compounded with the broiling radiance of the midday sun, under which you'd lain for many hours, had driven the French Pox out of your body. And indeed you have been a little more lucid every day since."

"What did the hoca el-pencik think of this?"

"When you walked out, you were naked, and sunburnt as red as a boiled crab, and there was speculation that you might be some species of ifrit. I have to tell you that the Turks have superstitions about everything, and most especially about Jews-they believe we have occult powers, and of late the Cabbalists have done much to foster such phant'sies. In any event, matters were soon enough sorted out. Our owner received one hundred strokes, with a cane the size of my thumb, on the soles of his feet, and vinegar was poured over the resulting wounds."

"Eeyeh, give me the bull's penis any day!"

"It's expected he may be able to stand up again in a month or two. In the meanwhile, as we wait out the equinoctial storms, we are careening and refitting our galley, as is obvious enough."

DURING THIS NARRATION Jack had been looking sidelong at the other galley-slaves, and had found them to be an uncommonly diverse and multi-cultural lot: there were black Africans, Europeans, Jews, Indians, Asiatics, and many others he could not clearly sort out. But he did not see anyone he recognized from the complement of God's Wounds.

"What of Yevgeny, and Mr. Foot? To speak poetically: have insurance claims been paid on them?"

"They are on the larboard oar. Yevgeny pulls with the strength of two men, and Mr. Foot pulls not at all-which makes them more or less inseparable, in the context of a well-managed galley."

"So they live!"

"Live, and thrive-we'll see them later."

"Why aren't they here, scraping barnacles like the rest of us?" Jack demanded peevishly.

"In Algiers, during the winter months, when galleys dare not venture out on the sea, oar-slaves are permitted-nay, encouraged-to pursue trades. Our owner receives a share of the earnings. Those who have no skills scrape barnacles."

Jack found this news not altogether pleasing, and assaulted a barnacle-cluster with such violence that he nearly stove in the boat's hull. This quickly drew a reprimand-and not from the Turkish whip-hand, but from a short, stocky, red-headed galley-

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slave on Jack's other side. "I don't care if you're crazy-or pretend to be-you keep that hull seaworthy, lest we all go down!" he barked, in an English that was half Dutch. Jack was a head taller than this Hollander, and considered making something of it-but he didn't imagine that their overseer would look kindly on a fracas, when mere talking was a flogging offense. Besides, there was a rather larger chap standing behind the carrot-top, who was eyeing Jack with the same expression: skeptical bordering on disgusted. This latter appeared to be a Chinaman, but he was not of the frail, cringing sort. Both he and the Hollander looked troublingly familiar.

"Put some slack into your haul-yards, there, shorty-you ain't the owner, nor the captain-as long as she stays afloat, what's a little dent or scratch to us?"

The Dutchman shook his head incredulously and went back to work on a single barnacle, which he was dissecting off a hull-clinker as carefully as a chirurgeon removing a stone from a Grand Duke's bladder.

"Thank you for not making a scene," Moseh said, "it is important that we maintain harmony on the starboard oar."

"Those are our oar-mates?"

"Yes, and the fifth is in town pursuing his trade."

"Well, why is it so important to remain on good terms with them?"

"Other than that we must share a crowded bench with them eight months out of the year, you mean?"

"Yes."

"We must all pull together if we are to maintain parity with the larboard oar."

"What if we don't?"

"The galley will-"

"Yes, yes, it'll go in circles. But why should we care?"

"Aside from that the skin will be whipped off our ribcages by that bull's pizzle?"

"I take that as a given."

"Oars come in matched sets. As matters stand, we have parity with the larboard oar, and therefore constitute a matched set of ten slaves. We were traded to our current owner as such. But if Yevgeny and his bench-mates begin to out-pull us, we'll be split up-your friends will end up in different galleys, or even different cities."

"It'd serve 'em right."

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"Pardon me?"

"Pardon me," Jack said, "but here we are on this fucking beach. And I may be a crazy Vagabond, but you appear to be an educated Jew, and that Dutchman is a ship's officer if ever there was one, and God only knows about that Chinaman-"

"Nipponese actually, but trained by the Jesuits."

"All right, then-this only supports my point."

"And your point is-?"

"What can Yevgeny and Mr. Foot possibly have that we don't?"

"They've formed a sort of enterprise wherein Yevgeny is Labor, and Mr. Foot is Management. Its exact nature is difficult to explain. Later, it will become clear to you. In the meantime, it's imperative that the ten of us remain together!"

"What possible reason could you have for giving a damn whether we stay together?"

"During the last several years of touring the Mediterranean behind an oar, I have been developing, secretly, in my mind, a Plan," said Moseh de la Cruz. "It is a plan that will bring all ten of us wealth, and then freedom, though possibly not in that order."

"Does armed mutiny enter into this plan? Because-"

Moseh rolled his eyes.

"I was simply trying to imagine what rôle a man such as myself could possibly have in any Plan-leastways, any Plan that was not invented by a raving Lunatick."

"It is a question I frequently asked myself, until today. Some earlier versions of the Plan, I must admit, involved throwing you overboard as soon as it was practicable. But today when fifteen hundred guns spoke from the three-tiered batteries of the Peñon and the frowning towers of the Kasba, some lingering obstructions were, it seems, finally knocked loose inside your head, and you were put back into your right mind again-or as close to it as is really possible. And now, Jack, you do have a rôle in the Plan."

"And am I allowed to know the nature of this rôle?"

"Why, you'll be our Janissary."

"But I am not a-"

"Hold, hold! You see that fellow scraping barnacles?"

"Which one? There must be a hundred."

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"The tall fellow, Arab-looking with a touch of Negro; which is to say Egyptian."

"I see him."

"That is Nyazi-one of the larboard crew."

"He's a Janissary?"

"No, but he's spent enough time around them that he can teach you to fake your way through it. Dappa-the black man, there-can teach you a few words of Turkish. And Gabriel-that Nipponese Jesuit-is a brave swordsman. He'll bring you up to par in no time."

"Why, exactly, does this plan demand a fake Janissary?"

"Really it demands a real one," Moseh sighed, "but in life one must make do with the materials at hand."

"My question is not answered."

"Later-when we are all together-I'll explain."

Jack laughed. "You speak like a courtier, in honeyed euphemisms. When you say 'together,' it means what? Chained together by our neck-irons in some rat-filled dungeon 'neath that Kasba?"

"Run your hand over the skin of your neck, Jack, and tell me: Does it feel like you've been wearing an iron collar recently?"

"Now that you mention it-no."

"Quitting time is nigh-then we'll go into the city and find the others."

"Haw! Just like that? Like free men?" Jack said, as well as much more in a similar vein. But an hour later, a strange wailing arose from several tall square towers planted all round the city, and a single gun was fired from the heights of the Kasba, and then all of the slaves put their scrapers down and began to wander off down the beach in groups of two or three. Seven whom Moseh had identified as belonging to the two Oars of his Plan tarried for a minute until all were ready to depart; the Dutchman, van Hoek, did not wish to leave until he was good and finished.

Moseh noticed a dropped hatchet, frowned, picked it up, and brushed away the damp sand. Then his eyes began to wander about, looking for a place to put it. Meanwhile he began to toss the hatchet absent-mindedly in his hand. Because its weight was all in its head, the handle flailed around wildly as it revolved in the air. But Moseh always caught it neatly on its way down. Presently his gaze fastened on one of the old dried-up tree-trunks that had been jammed into the sand, and used to

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prop up the galley so that its hull was exposed. He stared fixedly at this target whilst tossing the hatchet one, two, three more times, then suddenly drew the tool far back behind his head, stuck his tongue out, paused for a moment, then let the hatchet fly. It executed a single lazy revolution while hurtling across several fathoms of air, then stopped in an instant, one corner of its blade buried in the wood of the tree-trunk, high and dry.

The seven oar-slaves clambered up onto the footing of the colossal wall and made for the city gate. Jack followed along with the crowd, though he could not help hunching his shoulders, expecting to feel the whip across his back. But no stroke came. As he approached the gates he stood straighter and walked more freely, and sensed a group coalescing around him and Moseh: the irritable Dutchman, the Nipponese Jesuit, a black African with ropy locks of hair, the Egyptian named Nyazi, and a middle-aged Spaniard who seemed to be afflicted with some sort of spasmodic disorder. As they passed through the city gates, this fellow turned and shouted something at the Janissaries who were standing guard there. Jack didn't get every word of the Spanish, but it was something like, "Listen to me, you boy-fucking heathen scum, we have all formed a secret cabal!" Which was not exactly what Jack would've said under the circumstances- but Moseh and the others only exchanged broad, knowing grins with the Janissaries, and into the city they went: Den of Thieves, Nest of Wasps, Scourge of Christendom, Citadel of the Faith.

THE MAIN STREET of Algiers was uncommonly broad, and yet crowded with Turks sitting out smoking tobacco from fountain-sized hubbly-bubblies, but Jack, Moseh, and the other slaves did not spend very much time there. Moseh darted through a pointy keyhole-arch so narrow that he had to turn sideways, and led the others into a roofless corridor of stone that was not much wider, forcing them to go in single file, and to plaster themselves up against walls whenever someone came towards them. It felt much like being in a backhallway of some ancient building, save that when Jack looked up he could see a splinter of sky glaring between blank walls that rose ten to twenty yards above his head. Ladders and bridges had been set up between rooftops, joining the city's terraces and roof-gardens into a private net-work strung high up above the ground. Sometimes Jack would see a black-swathed form flit from one side to the other. It was difficult to get a clear look at them, for they were dark and furtive as bats, but they seemed to be wearing the same sort of garment as Eliza had when Jack had met her beneath Vienna, and, in any event, from the way they moved he could tell they were women.

Down in the street-if that word could even be used for a passage as strait as this one-there were no women. Of men there was a marvelous variety. The Janissaries who made up the ocak were easy to recognize-some had a Greek or Slavic appearance, but most had an Asiatic look about the eyes, and all went in splendid clothing: baggy pleated trousers, belted with a sash that supported all manner of pistols, scimitars, daggers, purses, tobacco-pouches, pipes, and even pocket-watches. Over a loose shirt, one or more fancy vests, used as a sort of display-case for ribbons of lace, gold pins, swatches of fine embroidery. A turban on the top, pointy-toed slippers below, sometimes a long cape thrown over the whole. Thus the ocak, who were afforded never so much respect by all who passed them in the street. Algiers was crowded with many other sorts: mostly the Moors and Berbers whose ancestors had lived here

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before the Turks had come to organize the place. These tended to wear long one-piece cloaks, or else raiments that were just many fathoms of fabric swirled round the body and held in place by clever tricks with pins and sashes. There was a smattering of Jews, always dressed in black, and quite a few Europeans wearing whatever had been fashionable in their homelands when they'd decided to turn Turk.

Some of these white men looked just as à la mode as the young gallants who'd made it their business to pester Eliza at the Maiden in Amsterdam, but too there was the occasional geezer tottering down a staircase in a neck-ruff, Pilgrim-hat, and van Dyck. "Jesus!" Jack exclaimed, observing one of the latter, "why are we slaves, and that old moth a respected citizen?"

The question only befuddled everyone except for the ropeheaded African, who laughed and shook his head. "It is very dangerous to ask certain questions," he said. "I should know."

"Who're you then, and how came you to speak better English than I?"

"I am named Dappa. I was-am-a linguist."

"That means not a thing to me," Jack said, "but as we are nothing more than a brace of slaves wandering around lost in a heathen citadel, I don't suppose there's any harm in hearing some sort of reasonably concise explanation."

"In fact we are not lost at all, but taking the most direct route to our destination," Dappa said. "But my story is a simple one-not like yours, Jack-and there will be more than enough time to relate it. All right then: every slave-port along the African coast must have a linguist-which signifies a man skilled in many tongues-or else how could the black slavers, who bring the stock out from the interior, make deals with the ships' captains who drop anchor off-shore? For those slavers come from many different nations, all speaking different languages, and likewise the captains may be English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Arab, or what-have-you. It all depends on the outcomes of various European wars, of which we Africans never know anything until the castle at the river-head suddenly begins to fly a different flag."

"Enough on that subject-I've fought in some of those wars."

"Jack, I am from a town on the river that is called, by white men, the Niger. This is an easy place to live-food grows on trees. I could rhapsodize about it but I will refrain. Suffice it to say 'twas a Garden of Eden. Save for the Institution of Slavery, which had always been with us. For as many generations as our priests and elders can remember, Arabs would occasionally come up the great river in boats and trade us cloth, gold, and other goods for slaves-"

"But where'd the slaves come from, Dappa?"

"The question is apt. Prior to my time they mostly came from farther up the river, marching in columns, joined together by wooden yokes. And some persons of my

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town were made slaves because they could not pay their debts, or as punishment for crimes."

"So you have bailiffs? Judges?"

"In my town the priests were very powerful, and did many of the things that bailiffs and judges do in your country."

"When you say priests I don't imagine you mean men in funny hats, prating in Latin-
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