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Opening Extract from...

The Fourth Assassin

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Chapter 1

As he left the R train and came up the narrow, gum-blackened steps from the Fourth Avenue subway in Brooklyn, Omar Yussef glanced around for armed robbers and smiled. He recalled the secretary of his school in Dehaisha Refugee Camp warning him that New Yorkers would gun you down for a dollar. The scattered pedestrians stooped, as if beneath some invisible burden, scuttling over the wide sidewalks of Bay Ridge Avenue. Their heads lowered to the cold wind, they dropped into the subway without looking at him. He thought of the response he had given his worried co-worker: "I'm a Palestinian. Brooklyn will be a vacation from the dangers of my life in Bethlehem."

The sky was a blank, featureless gray above the three-story row houses. To Omar Yussef, the upper half of the landscape appeared to be missing, as though it had been concreted over. He checked his wristwatch and wondered if he had miscalculated when he set it to New York time. Its champagne-colored dial told him it was noon, but he couldn't remember ever having seen the sun so absolutely obscured at its zenith, even during blinding desert sandstorms.

He came to the corner of Fifth Avenue. From his pocket

he withdrew a slip of paper. With freezing fingers he lifted it close to his face and read the address scrawled across it. This, it seemed, was the right place. He sniffed and frowned at the tawdry shops along the block. He shambled past a jeweler's which bore the name of a famous Ramallah clan in Arabic characters on its purple awning and a café named for Jerusalem, *al-Quds*, the holy. Across the street, a doctor whose family Omar Yussef knew in Bethlehem had his office and, beside it, a sign proclaimed the offices of the Arab Community Association.

Omar Yussef shuffled along the broken sidewalk, skirting piles of dirty snow shoveled against battered newspaper-vending boxes. He squinted against a freezing gust and pulled his thin, fawn windbreaker around the slack skin of his neck. Drops of water blown from the tainted snow spotted his spectacles. He wrinkled his nose and pursed his lips.

This was his son's home, the section of Brooklyn where his countrymen lived. Little Palestine.

Except for the Arabic signs above the shopfronts, the avenue appeared archetypally American to Omar Yussef. Pristine cars, polished to a luminous finish he had only ever seen in Bethlehem on a government minister's sedan, nuzzled the brown snow at the curb. The Stars and Stripes rattled against the lampposts in the wind. For some puzzling reason, the gray, leafless trees along the sidewalk were adorned with large red ribbons tied in bows.

A Muslim woman hurried out of a *halal* butcher. Her head wrapped in a cream *mendil*, she puffed out her dark cheeks against the cold and hunched her shoulders beneath a coat

that appeared to have been made for the Arctic. She caught Omar Yussef's eye and, looking demurely to the ground as she passed, muttered, "Peace be upon you."

"Upon you, peace," Omar Yussef replied. With these words, the first he had uttered in Arabic since his Royal Jordanian Airlines flight had touched down at JFK, he felt suddenly homesick and filled with regret that he had arrived too lightly clothed for the New York winter. At home, snow came every two or three years and swiftly melted. Despite his son's warnings, he had felt sure that New York's weather couldn't be so much worse. With his combination of extreme orderliness and dandiness, he had brought only a small half-filled suitcase, intending to add a few tasteful purchases of fine clothing before he returned to Palestine. Anticipating that he would buy a new hat, he had even left behind his favorite tweed cap. As he watched the woman haul her purchases along the block, Omar Yussef felt the white hair he combed over his bald crown lift on the raw wind.

At a door beside a boutique selling the traditional embroidered robes of the Palestinian villages which, in Arabic, confided that it was the establishment of someone named Abdelrahim, Omar Yussef checked the address once more. Then he shoved through the cheap black door and mounted the grubby staircase toward his son's apartment.

The corridor at the top of the flight of stairs was dark and silent. Omar Yussef paused to catch his breath and to let his eyes adjust to the dim light filtering up from the ground floor. A bus pulled away on the avenue, and a car briefly sounded its horn. Someone was cooking in one of the apartments. He

inhaled a smoky undertone of eggplant beneath the thick, fatty odor of lamb and recognized the dish as *ma'aluba*. No one slow-cooked the meat and eggplant so that their flavors rose through the pot, infusing the rice, quite the way his wife Maryam did. Once again he felt the sense of isolation that had come over him with those first Arabic words spoken on the strange street, as though the tongue, which tasted and talked, were the natural seat of loneliness. He pulled himself up straight. He reminded himself that his son, whom he hadn't seen for more than a year and whom he loved, was waiting for him in one of these rooms, and he recovered a little of the excitement he had felt as he left the subway. He smoothed his gray mustache, smiled briskly to be sure that the chill outside hadn't frozen his features, and scuffed along the narrow, sticky strip of red linoleum toward the door of apartment number 2A.

It was open.

Omar Yussef halted. An inch of iron-gray light groped past the door into the corridor. He knew little about Brooklyn, but he knew that it was not a place where people left doors unlocked, let alone ajar. He stilled his breath and listened. Another car honked on the street. The apartment was quiet. He knocked twice and waited.

"Ala," he called. "Ala, my son. It's Dad."

Above the number, a strip of paper was taped to the door. On it, in a florid Arabic script, were written the words: *Castle of the Assassins*. Omar Yussef's lips twitched in a nervous smile. *Nizar always had good penmanship*, he thought. *That's a nice joke.*

He noticed a button in the center of the door. When he

pushed it, a dull bell sounded, but the pressure of his finger also swung the door back on silent hinges. He stepped into the living room of his son's apartment.

Once more he called his son's name and added those of his roommates. "Rashid, Nizar? Greetings. It's Abu Ramiz."

The room was shabby, furnished with a dilapidated sofa and three dining chairs, one of which was missing its plastic backrest. On the far wall hung a cheap, yellow prayer rug woven with the image of the *kaba*, the black stone at the heart of the Great Mosque in Mecca. Beside it, a page torn from a magazine had been taped to the wall. It bore a photo of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. On a low table by the door sat a model of the same shrine made of matchsticks, the size of a football, painted gaudy yellow and turquoise. *The kind of art our boys make in Israeli jails*, Omar Yussef thought.

He crossed the room, with a wariness born of unfamiliarity and anxiety, and smelled the heavy, vinegary homeliness of *foule* coming from the tiny kitchen. He looked inside, noticed a grimy pot on the stove and a few brown smears of the fava-bean mash at its bottom. He held his hand over the pot and felt some warmth. A magnet advertising a Muslim community newspaper clamped a sheet of paper to the door of the refrigerator. It was a photocopy of the prayer times at a mosque called the *Masjid al-Alamut*.

Omar Yussef raised his eyebrows. *Alamut*, he thought. *The real castle of the Assassins. These boys didn't forget my history lessons.*

He knocked at a bedroom door and looked in. The shades were closed. He reached for a light switch. The bed was unmade. In the small room, a free-standing closet obscured most of

the window. A calligraphic rendering of the opening lines of the Koran in gold on black hung above the bed. On the windowsill, there were two framed pictures of Rashid. The first showed him with his parents. The second had been taken when he was a high-school student, posing with his three closest friends and his history teacher, a grinning Omar Yussef. He shook his head. The photograph reminded him of how quickly he had aged. Maybe it was only that the smile seemed out of place in his current life, so full of misery and death had his hometown become since the days when he had taught the boys who now lived in this apartment.

He went to the next room. One curtain was open. The window cast a dim light, enough only for Omar Yussef to make out that someone was there, lying in the shadows on the bed furthest from the door.

"Ala, my son? Wake up." He knocked lightly on the doorjamb. "Nizar?"

The form on the bed didn't stir. In the sickly light from the window, Omar Yussef could see a pair of legs clothed in well-pressed black slacks and shiny black ankle boots. He approached, squinting into the shadows. He reached out to shake the sleeper's arm, touched the sleeve of a silk shirt, and found it was wet. He recoiled and yanked back the second curtain.

Omar Yussef stumbled, dropping onto the other bed. His pulse was suddenly overpowering. He pressed his hand to his heart as though to keep it from beating right through his rib cage and fleeing the apartment.

The man on the bed was dead. Where his head should have been, the darkness of blood soaked the pillow. A light

gauzy piece of fabric had been laid above the ragged flesh of the neck. Blood covered the man's shirt and was splattered across the wall. The corpse's hands were bloodied too. Omar Yussef's cheek twitched. His eyes blinked and teared up.

Is this my son? he thought. His shoulders shook and he went down onto his knees, crawling toward the bed. His hands slopped through the blood on the floor by the nightstand. He whimpered and a burst of acid vomit burned out of his mouth. *It can't be him.* He wiped his sniffling nose and his lips with his wrist, staring at the body. The dead man had been short and slight, with a slim waist and delicate hands. *He has Ala's build. Do I recognize this shirt? Is it Ala's?*

On the nightstand, he saw a letter in his own careful hand. It lay unfolded beside the alarm clock, on top of a book of poetry by Taha Muhammad Ali. He picked it up. *My dear son, Your dear mother sends her love, and your niece Nadia encloses a short story she wrote about something mysterious that happened in Nablus. Here are my travel details: If Allah wills it, I shall arrive for the UN conference on the morning of February 11 and shall come immediately to see you in Brooklyn. As we have discussed so many times and with such anticipation, you will show me around Little Palestine. . . .*

He crumpled the pages in a bloodied fist and laid his shaking hand on the corpse's chest. His pulse palpitated so strongly in his palm that his hand seemed to rise and fall, as though the dead man's ribs still lifted with breath. The pooled blood seeped into his trousers, chilling his knees. *May the King of the Day of Judgment forgive me for all my transgressions,* he thought, *and find it displeasing that this should be my boy*

before me. As his joints stiffened in the cold gore, he knew that he lacked the faith that might will this body back to life. He was not a believer. His prayer only made him feel more desperate and isolated. He shuffled backward, away from the bed, and wept.