

ARABESQUE

A novel by DYLAN EVANS

CHAPTER ONE

The novel opens with the death of the Almohad Caliph, Abu Yaqulb Yusuf, in 1184. When the court physician, Ibn Rushd, examines the body of the dead Caliph, he finds a fragment of the root of a fig tree grasped tightly in the Caliph's left hand. Rushd immediately suspects foul play, since he knows that the Caliph was right-handed. Later that day, in the privacy of his laboratory, Rushd asks his young apprentice Dawud what he makes of this puzzle...

"I do not know *what* to make of it," I replied, "other than that it is a strange and puzzling sign."

"Think, my dear Dawud," my master urged. "Does it not call to mind a verse from the Noble Book?"

"You mean the verse about the good tree? *Have you not considered how Allah compares a good word to a good tree, whose root is firmly fixed and whose branches reach up high into the sky?*"

"Good, my dear Dawud!" exclaimed my master, slapping me on the back as was his wont when he wished to signal his approval. "But this is not the verse I was thinking of. There is another kind of root, a more metaphorical one."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, master," I said, shaking my head.

"I am thinking of the seventh verse of Surat al-i-Imran, which speaks of *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge.*"

"I see," I said, nodding hesitantly. "But the link to this verse seems rather tenuous by comparison, does it not?"

"It does indeed, my dear Dawud," said my master. "Which is precisely why it may be more apposite on this occasion."

This was typical of my master's manner of speaking. He would often speak in paradoxes, especially when he wished me to pay particular attention to something.

“You will have to explain why, my dear master,” I muttered. “I am still young and my mind is not practised in this kind of interpretation.”

“Yes of course, my dear Dawud,” said my master, smiling kindly at me. “You are my student, and it is my task to instruct you in the art of reasoning. Do not worry, I will explain my thinking to you step by step. Let us start with the phrase itself. To whom does this verse refer when it speaks of *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge?*”

“Does it not refer to those who believe without questioning? For *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe in it. All of it is from our Lord.*”

“That is one interpretation, my dear Dawud. But there is another. I am not surprised you have never heard of it, for those who subscribe to this line of thinking do not usually talk openly about it.”

“And what is this other interpretation, master?”

“To understand the other interpretation,” my master replied enigmatically, “you must revise the punctuation of the verse.”

At this point, he took down his favourite copy of the Noble Book from a shelf on the wall and kissed it reverently before laying it down on a table. Then he turned to the opening pages of Surat al-i-Imran, and traced the words of the seventh verse one by one with his forefinger, pausing only when he reached the word *Allahu*.

“You see this symbol here?” he said, pointing to a small squiggle like the letter *mim* which was written above the sacred Name.

“Yes, master,” I said. “It is the *waqf al-lazim*. It tells us that we must pause here when reciting the verse aloud.”

“Well done, my dear Dawud. So please recite the verse, pausing as indicated by the symbol.”

And so I did. “*It is He who has sent down to you the book; in it are verses that are straightforward – they are the mother of the book – and other verses that are obscure. As for those whose hearts are given to swerving, they will chase after the obscure verses, seeking temptation and seeking the deeper interpretation. And no one knows the deeper interpretation except Allah. And those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe in it. All of it is from our Lord. And no one will be reminded except those of understanding.*”

“Very good,” smiled my master. “But now observe what happens when we move the *waqf al-lazim* a little further along the verse, and place it not above the sacred Name but above the word *knowledge*.” And, to my great amazement, he erased the *waqf al-lazim* from the text with a little piece of rubber, and wrote it in the new position he had indicated.

“Now, my dear Dawud, would you kindly read the verse again, observing the new position of the obligatory pause?”

I did as my master requested, reading the words slowly and reverently as befits the Sacred Book: *“It is He who has sent down to you the book; in it are verses that are straightforward – they are the mother of the book – and other verses that are obscure. As for those whose hearts are given to swerving, they will chase after the obscure verses, seeking temptation and seeking the deeper interpretation. And no one knows the deeper interpretation except Allah and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge. They say: We believe in it...”*

I stopped before finishing the verse, struck by the altered sense which the new pause had imparted.

“But this completely changes the meaning of the verse!” I exclaimed.

“It does indeed, my dear Dawud. But how, exactly, does it change?”

“When the *waqf al-lazim* is placed above the sacred Name, as it usually is, the verse tells us that the deeper interpretation of the text is known only to Allah. But when the *waqf al-lazim* is placed above the word *knowledge*, the verse tells us that the deeper interpretation is known both to Allah and to *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge.*”

“Well done. And who, pray, are these wonderful people?”

“I do not know, master. But whoever they are, they are truly blessed!”

“They are indeed, my dear Dawud.”

“But who are they?” I insisted. “Will you not tell me?”

“There are several groups who claim this title, but there is one in particular whose hands I suspect may be at work here in the death of our beloved Caliph.”

“And who may that be?” I enquired, eager to know more.

“It is just a hunch at present, my dear Dawud, and we must investigate further before we reach any definite conclusions, but I would not be surprised if the Caliph was trying to give us a clue to the identity of his murderer.”

“By Allah!” I cried out. “You mean that the Caliph, in his dying moments, grabbed this piece of root and enclosed it in his fist precisely in order to tell us who killed him?”

“That is exactly what I mean. And I believe that he was pointing us towards the *ahl al-bayt*, to the Prophet’s Household itself.”

“You mean the shia?” I asked, my mouth open with amazement.

“Yes, my dear Dawud. And more particularly a sect of the shia called the Nizaris, whose headquarters are located in the castle of Alamut. Have you heard about them?”

“Yes, master. There is a long chapter about them in *The Book of Government* by Nizam al-Mulk. It says there that their aim is to abolish Islam, to mislead mankind and cast us all into perdition.”

“I wouldn’t believe everything you read, my dear Dawud. There is a lot of nonsense written about the Nizaris. Having said that, it is true that they are a dangerous bunch. It is well known that their leaders advocate, as a matter of policy, the use of assassination in dealing with their adversaries.”

“And you think the Nizaris are behind the death of the Caliph? That it was one of their assassins who murdered him in his bed?”

“It may well be, my dear Dawud. But we must not jump to conclusions. We must follow the clues carefully and find out where they lead. Come! We do not have a moment to lose!”

CHAPTER TWO