

CHAPTER FOUR

Ory Baskan stepped aside revealing a hallway hung with faded tapestries and lit by a lantern suspended from the ceiling. Abel guided Cain out of the darkness and down the hall after Ory's slim, lithely-moving figure.

Ory majestically swung open a door and, entering, held it until his visitors stood in a decorous but barely furnished long room, lit only by two floor lamps. Their red shade cast pale areas onto the ceiling and deepened the night's shadow in the rest of the room. One lamp stood over a wooden stool on the top of which was propped the photograph of a turbaned man who seemed to stare aloofly down at the many-colored carpet over which Ory now tread in brown bare feet. With a slight wave of the hand, their host designated pillows for them to sit upon while he walked to the other end of the room to bow before the photograph.

Abel, with a look of disgust, sat down heavily on the floor. Cain lowered his thin body onto a pillow. Once down, he snapped his legs up close to his body, his knees under his chin, and his arms encircling his shins while his large eyes watched Ory with fascination.

Abel noted the particulars of Ory's dress with detached amusement. He wore a full skirt and a worn-looking brown doublet, close-fitting about the chest and tight-fitting sleeves. Around his waist, pulled in tightly, wound a cord which held three flat knots over his stomach. Crescent shaped stones dangled from his earlobes, and a skull cap fitted his head.

Abel frowned quizzically and wondered why fate had led him into this bizarre scene. He sensed he was about to witness some type of religious ritual. He looked at several boards hanging on the walls or suspended on wires from the ceiling with Arabic writing in silver finely sketched over their black surfaces. Framed water-color paintings, small reproductions of mosques, of Turkish cities and woodland scenes were placed zigzag fashion over the walls, which seemed higher because bare of furniture, except for the low stool supporting the Sheik's photograph. "Too sacred to be moved," he mused.

A bare-footed, white-robed boy of about ten entered noiselessly and squatted near the stool. He began to play a flute. As Cain listened to the first throaty notes, he excitedly pulled Abel by the shoulder pads of his coat towards him so that Abel careened like a ship on its keel in rough weather.

"See," he whispered, pointing to Ory.

Abel saw Ory bow to the left and then to the right, then hold out his hand to the photograph. Abel noticed that his right big toe was crossed over his left.

"Admirable," Cain said, "but pathetic."

Abel almost laughed. "What do you mean?"

"He's a Whirling Dervish."

As the flute notes floated through the room, Abel watched the motions of Ory Baskan and gradually slipped into a state of an enrapt spectator.

Ory, balancing himself on his left foot, began to turn himself with his right. Gradually, as he spun around slowly but smoothly, he extended his arms and, raising his right hand palm uppermost, he lowered his left hand turning the palm downward. With an expression of deep meditation in which all the sorrow and despair he had known lined his face, Ory closed his eyes and dropped his head on his left shoulder. He spun for several minutes and then began to chant, "La ilaha il Allah." A serene look replaced the troubled lines. The repetition of the words had a calming effect, as if he had found peace in evoking the chant.

Cain leaned over and whispered the translation of the chant in Abel's ear. "There is no God but God."

"Say that often enough," Abel said, "and you begin to believe it."

Ory Baskan spun more swiftly so that his yellow skirt mushroomed out and gradually rose until his white silk undershorts could be seen. He twirled effortlessly like a toy top. The light playing of the flute and his tall graceful body, which paradoxically seeming relaxed, exuded an aura of peace to the surroundings.

Cain's face reddened with excitement. The sickly look of a moment ago gave way to a glow about his eyes. He was watching the dancer's movements as if he saw signs and symbols in them. Stretching out his arms, he twisted his fingers nervously around each other. Then, as the dance continued, he became very still and concentrated on Ory as if mentally whirling in company with him.

Despite himself, Abel felt drawn towards Ory, and he resented it. The dance fascinated him. He marveled how Ory's graceful figure seemed to float to the notes of the flute. Abel himself felt wafted into another world, a strange world never before experienced by him, as if time had stopped and he was confronted with the timeless present.

The atmosphere became for him more fantastical, and all the objects in the room appeared to float as lightly as Ory. The shadows lightened, and the room became brightly lit and every object perceived as huge and clearly in their most perfected form, as if existing in their pristine state in eternity.

Abel felt himself held in the grip of a powerful force centered in the dervish. From the very vortex of his perfect whirls, he seemed to emit his control in concentric rings over his spectators and over everything around him until his whole personality was one supreme force in the room. His Eastern maleness, his mystical detachment, his sublime magnetism, all combined to fling his enraptured guest into a strange universe. With his eyes riveted on the whirling dervish, Abel's concentration, like the dervish's, seemed to increase in intensity. All matter seemed to vanish, and suddenly Abel found himself face to face with his naked spirit. For a moment, he saw and understood the meaning of wisdom, the essence of truth as he lost all consciousness of his material surroundings.

Abruptly the flute stopped. The sombre-visaged boy jumped to his feet and stamped thrice. Ory slowly brought his whirling to a halt and stood quite motionless. The silence enveloped Abel and Cain, as if drugging them with its oppressiveness. Finally, Ory raised his head and snapped his fingers to dismiss the boy. Abel shook himself as if to awake himself. He got to his feet and watched the tall dervish approach him. He wanted to dangle the man on the end of a string. He wanted to laugh at him because this dervish had dared to awe him momentarily with his ritual dance. This dervish, who had captured and subdued his emotion, and who had for a while annihilated any trace of conscious intelligence in him, shook his complacency. He was vaguely afraid that he could be subjected to the power of some unknown force or of some other being. It deeply disturbed his confidence, and he resented it. He felt a deep antipathy to Ory.

Cain reacted differently. He sprang to his feet and, raising his arms, cried out to the ceiling, "Marvellous!" The ritual and the submission of his reason seemed not to bother him at all. He was ecstatic in the discovery that Ory was a genuine dervish. He felt exhilarated and inspired, for, after years of waiting, he had at last found his soul-mate.

"You have incredible power," he cried. "I would never have dared guess that I would be so fortunate as to meet someone like you."

Ory raised his hand as if asking for silence. He beckoned them to follow. His aged face glowed with exhilaration despite his obvious fatigue, although his slightly somnolent look showed that he had not fully recovered from the spell of the dance. Treading lightly on his toes, he led them to a small study where there were several leather armchairs, a writing desk, and several shelves of richly-bound books.

"Before the owner of this apartment left our world, he gave me this furniture," Ory said, "my only European furniture."

He walked to a hearth and fumbled on a mantelpiece. A table lamp shed light onto the floor casting the higher levels of the room in deep shadow. He found a match and struck it. He bent to the wood hearth and lit the paper below it in several places, flicked the lit-end of the match stick, and threw it into the blaze.

On seeing Ory move about the furnished study in his colored robes, Abel was struck by the changed figure he presented. No longer did he suit his surroundings, rather he might have been a costumed actor. There was no doubt, however, that he was a dervish. Who else could whirl like that? But what was a dervish doing in Vienna?

He tried to determine why he disliked him, but he could find no satisfactory answer, except that he felt that he could not trust him. He's too incredible to trust!

For emphasis he pounded the arm of an upholstered chair as he sat in it. Dust faintly beclouded his fist.

Ory eyed the arm with embarrassment. "My niece is sick, unfortunately, and the housework has been neglected."

Nodding, Abel sensed Ory's annoyance and guessed that he and his niece did not get along.

"Are you the only Turkish Dervish left?" Cain asked as if unable to contain his curiosity any longer.

Ory threw up his head and closed his eye in an Arabic denial. "Many fled to other parts of Islam." The fire crackled brightly behind him, tinting his yellow skirt with flecks of orange. "We all wait to go back."

Cain's eyes darkened. "Too late. Once orthodoxy and the State are enmeshed, it would take a revolution to break them asunder."

"And," Abel broke in with a scoff, "who would revolt on behalf of the dervishes? Atatürk made a pretty clean sweep across the country, didn't he?"

Ory ignored Abel and turned to Cain with a slight smile. "We will wait, that is all. We will endure. Many years I have wandered and endured more privation than the Mevelani taught me, until I found refuge here."

Abel, rankling from Ory's snub and from his superior dignity, felt the urge to humiliate him through ridicule, but only managed to sound ridiculous himself.

"The Government can reach you here and pull this place down around your ears," Abel laughed. "Say, Cain, Nero fiddled while Rome burned, didn't he? Well, this old boy can dance on his falling bricks."

Cain gave him a withering look. Abel turned with an amused smirk to watch Ory walk to the hearth and gaze into the fire. When the dervish faced them, he held his noble head high and looked at Abel with disdain. Abel looked away.

"When our religious order was disbanded," Ory said bitterly, "my leader was hanged, and I was driven from my country. I have seen enough of political upheavals. I wish no part of wars or revolutions. I detest idealists who are so in name only, who no sooner come to power than they reveal their black hearts and murder their defenceless predecessors. I wait in exile until I can go quietly home. Meanwhile, I am happy here with my God." He looked directly at Abel.

The impossibility of doubting his sincerity silenced Abel.

Ory held out his arm to Cain. "I called you this night because I overheard what you said in the cafe. I knew we must work together. We believe in the same things."

His confident tone infuriated Abel. He was amazed that Cain appeared not to find Ory offensive. "Come off it," he shouted, unable to contain himself. "Did you or didn't you take his money?"

"Abel!" Cain cried angrily.

But Ory seemed not to mind Abel. "His manners are not the best, Mister Cain, but he brings us quickly to the point. I confess to you that I needed the money for my niece, who is very sick. I took it to save you and myself the embarrassment of my asking for it."

Cain shifted uneasily in his chair. "If I knew that you had not experienced the vulgar indiscretion of the West, my embarrassment on my friend's behalf would be unbearable at this moment."

"Oh, my God!" gasped Abel, clasping his hands to his head. "I, embarrass you? Can't you see he's making a fool out of you." He jabbed a finger at Ory. "There is socialized medicine in this country, Mr. Baskan. It is free. There is no need for money."

"Austrian socialism only helps the man who works," Cain interposed quickly.

"I work at prayer," Ory said meaningfully, "although it is not a paying occupation." He reached behind him and brought a flat rock into view. "The stone easily fits over my stomach."

"The dervish's stone of contentment," Cain informed Abel. "It presses away the bite of hunger right where the three knots are—truth, honesty and chastity. Unfortunately, there is no stone to take away the sting of sickness."

Abel was still annoyed with Cain. He could hardly take an interest in what he said. He felt Cain had sided with the dervish against him.

"Mister Cain, I recognized in you a fellow wanderer in the land of mysticism," Ory began softly, once more ignoring Abel.

"Don't mind me," Abel retorted, truly stung. He got to his feet and swaggered into the large room. "I'm out here, Cain, in case you need me."

Ory did not so much as glance after him. He seemed concerned only with Cain.

Standing off to the side of the doorway where he could see but not be seen, Abel watched Ory and Cain with puzzled interest.

"Is your wandering not lonely at times?" Ory was saying. "I have found companionship in our circle. We meet here often."

"Fellow mystics?" Cain cried.

"Yes," Ory said. "We don't all agree about the means but we all concur that only through a powerful movement can the world be unified, and that it is up to us to begin that movement." Ory appeared to regard Cain as someone trustworthy to whom he could introduce the secrets of his sufism. "If you come to our next meeting, you will meet Herr Grunewald who is interested in astrology. We have a variety of thinkers. In two nights we will assemble. You will meet Frau Tanya. She is beautiful. You will come?"

Cain grinned uneasily. "Meetings like that frighten me. I feel that any seriousness of purpose is lost in a sort of hodgepodge. Only with One Collective Will of true mystics can anything be accomplished. You know that only through absolute concentration can you reach God in deep meditation; you shut out all noise, all distractions, and your mood of concentration is enforced. Your people call the flute linnet-voiced because it leads you like a linnet bird to feed on the purple-headed flax of paradise. Keats' Nightingale led him over the hill and dale of inspiration the same way." Cain shuddered and stood up. "Your group needs a flute to guide its contemplation," Cain added. "If I can be that flute, I will come."

Throwing out his arms, Ory encircled them about Cain and drew him affectionately against his chest.

Cain paled. "Don't!"

Surprised, Ory stepped away.

"Forgive me, but I don't like being touched," Cain explained apologetically.

Abel went to a window and looked out on a back alley. Cain's extreme sensitivity alarmed him. The strangeness of both men had made the evening unreal. His angry exit was the only reassuring emotion that convinced him he still belonged to the earth.

He smiled as he admitted to himself that he had been play-acting. His mockery of Ory had served no purpose. He should have played along with the dervish and informed Cain about his reservations in private later. He should have known better that Ory would never succumb to his antagonism. He felt Cain was a fool to be taken in by a little fancy dance. Yet Abel could not rid himself of a nameless fear that he himself had come under the spell of the dervish. He could not quite understand why he mistrusted Ory but liked Cain. Both were mystics, although he believed that Cain was a naive idealist, and he did not want to see him fall into a trap, which he felt sure Ory was setting for him. Cain was rich after all, and Ory had helped himself freely to his money.

When his neck felt cool and his head had cleared, he turned to look into the long room again. He noticed that the photograph of the Dervish Sheik was turned upside down in its frame, leaving the fierce visage glaring at the ceiling. He wondered if this had any significance, or whether Ory was unaware of it, and amused himself by imagining Ory's expression on discovering it during his next ritual.

In one corner of the room was a chellek, a curved stick which was used for beating neophytes when they neglected to say 'La ilaha il Allah' one hundred and one times. His headmaster had owned one and Abel recalled with what malice he had boasted of its purpose. Abel swatted the air with it, but it evoked such unpleasant memories that he dropped it with disgust and headed for a doorway on an impulse to find the little boy on which it was used. The doorway led to the kitchen. He stepped into it and listened. Children's whisperings came through the open door of an adjoining room. Poking his head around the door, he stared at a girl sitting in bed talking to the little boy in the white nightgown. He was the same boy who had played the flute so divinely. He was kneeling beside the girl and tinkering with a lamp fastened to the head post of the bed.

"Aieee," breathed the girl bringing a hand to her mouth.

"Olur," said the boy as he jumped round, eyes wide, to see the bearded face that had watched his master dance. He scrambled down from the bed, and, smiling broadly, he bowed to Abel, who, on, seeing himself welcomed, stepped into the room.

"English speak," smiled the boy, pointing to the frightened girl.

"The sandman has come to put you to sleep," Abel made big round eyes as he approached the girl.

She ceased to look frightened but stared reproachfully at him instead. He felt awkward. With a very white face and fresh skin, she seemed no more than twelve, but her eyes, lustrous like black olives, haughtily demanded that she be treated as an adult.

"Do you really speak English?" Abel gulped.

"I was born in Cornish Penzance," she answered softly with a slightly lilting accent. "I spent my young days watching the tide move in and out around the Mount of St. Mike."

"Didn't you learn to sleep in Penzance?"

Her eyes blazed, as she angrily replied, "You are a fine one to talk of sleep and make my uncle dance the night long to the pipe."

Abel, stunned, was unable to answer. The girl was not being precocious; she was really angry.

The small boy laughed as if to break the tension. He found Abel amusing and was excited by his intrusion into the room. At first Abel mistook his laugh for mockery and frowned at him but realized the boy was only being friendly. He was distracted by the girl, who continued to say evenly, "I am older than you think." She resented Abel's condescension. "I am grown up. And even if I were not, I could still walk the night without fear because Allah is with me."

Amused by the bold words which contrasted with her small childish voice, he felt more at ease. "Are you Ory Baskan's niece?" he asked kindly, perching on the edge of the bed. He saw that she had regained her composure and was no longer angry with him.

She nodded, "When mother died two years ago, I was sent to him here. He is very strict."

He saw her blink when she referred to her mother's death.

"Who is your small friend?" Abel asked, pointing to the boy.

The girl regarded the boy in white, who was standing at the side of the bed and gazing up at them.

"Aksiz."

At the mention of his name, the boy shouted and scrambled onto the bed to squirm against the pillows next to the girl.

"He is only nine years old," she explained. "But he plays the pipe well for a young lad."

"What's he saying?" Aksiz asked in Turkish.

"Nothing." She forced him to give her more room by elbowing him away.

Abel thought of the money which Ory Baskan had taken. "Uncle tells me you are sick. Is that right?"

"The doctors said I have a cold in my lungs, and I must stay in bed. I don't want to. My uncle is angry that I am not able to work. But I am past caring. In England I did not have to scrub, and wash, and houseclean. I liked Cornwall and the coast. I can tell you stories of the pirates who came there."

"I was a pirate," Abel boasted.

He saw her eyes widen in alarm. She whispered to Aksiz, who, on glancing at Abel's beard, climbed over the girl to sit on the opposite side of the bed. Abel smiled to himself. If they were going to spend the night talking, they might as well hear some tales to keep them wide awake. He twirled his mustache and chuckled as he tried to think of a story. He had to think quickly for already the girl was looking doubtfully at him. But before he could begin, a voice interrupted him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Kingston. It is time for you to leave us." Ory Baskan's voice sounded deeply behind him. "Sophia must have rest."

Something in Abel rebelled. God! he thought, why do I dislike him so much? Before he could stop himself, he blurted out, "Isn't it too late to think of that?" Then smiling a good-bye to Sophia and Aksiz, he pulled a long face to represent Ory Baskan and left the room. The children seemed afraid to laugh at him although their eyes glowed in repressed amusement.

"Turn out the light," Ory commanded.

"Uncle, I cannot sleep. Let us have it," Sophia pleaded.

Ory barked sharply in Turkish, and Sophia snapped off the light. Abel walked past the Dervish to Cain, who stood waiting for him in the kitchen.

"Come along and see these monkeys," he said as he took Cain by the arm. "Come and see the kind your holy dervish has conscripted for your perfect society. They'd stay awake all night praying."

Cain let himself be taken to the threshold where he looked blankly at the darkness in the direction Abel pointed.

"Uncle, can I turn on the light. Please, Uncle," Sophia's voice tremored with curiosity at the addition of yet another stranger.

"Turn it on; then off right away."

The light blinked on. Sophia sat with little Aksiz beside her looking at Cain and Abel. She stared directly at Cain, her black eyes fixed in surprise, her arm stretched out to hold onto the light switch but powerless to turn it off.

"This is Mister Cain," Ory announced. "You will see more of him because he will come to see us often."

Sophia's white face slowly began to color as the blood rushed to her cheeks. With a slight smile she clicked off the light and sat in silence.

"Damned dramatic, don't you think?" Abel said pulling Cain with him through the kitchen and back to the hallway where Ory had preceded them to open the front door. "She's a pretty wench, too. Pity she has to be under the control of this despotic whirligig," Abel whispered as he glared at Ory. "It's too bad you're so bloody blind, Cain, my boy, or you would know what I mean." Then turning to Ory, he said. "Make sure you get her a good doctor, Baskan. She's a lovely girl."

Ory stepped into the corridor and switched on the stair light. "I'll be expecting you, Mister Cain," he said, ignoring Abel.

"Yes," Cain said dreamingly. "I'll come."

"La il Allah," Abel waved at the white-headed man and strode arm in arm with Cain down the stairs.

Cain extricated his arm from Abel's grasp and stumbled to the far side of the stairway.

"What's the matter? Are you tired, at last?" Abel asked, "You should be able to walk better than that."

"No," Cain said.

"No what?"

Cain hummed as if he were trying to focus on what Abel was saying. "No, I'm not."

"Don't talk in riddles. What's the matter? You were fairly coherent several hours ago. No, you're not what?"

"Tired," Cain replied.

Abel opened the street door for Cain to pass through.

"Are you happy with Ory Baskan's ideas?"

"Yes, Abel, but I will need you. I don't trust Baskan."

"You don't say?" Abel furrowed his brows in mock surprise.

Dawn had begun to break in the eastern sky, and soon the sun would fall nakedly across the day as Abel hoped to fall across his bed. He pondered whether he should ask Cain for his coat. It seemed petty somehow after the exhilaration of an extraordinary Arabian night. He held out his hand instead.

"Here's where we part," he said. "You can see your way home all right, can't you?"

Cain stepped back and stood by the lamppost, shining yellow against the pale sky. His eyes bright with fun, he pushed his hands deep into his pockets and said, "I have one question. What is the girl's name?"

Abel, puzzled for a moment, frowned before he knew whom Cain meant. "That child?" He laughed. "Sophia."

"She was the girl I was looking for on the day you offered me shelter from the rain."

Dumbfounded, Abel looked deeply into Cain's happily beaming eyes, and he knew that there was nothing he could say.