

The Power of Fire
by Bob Mendes

Main Characters PRIVATE

The Jews

SHARON STERN Medical student, daughter of Simon Stern, wife of Sam Hofman

SIMON STERN Doctor, father of Sharon

MITRA STERN Younger sister of Sharon

SAMUEL HOFMAN Dutchman, officer in the Aliyah Beth, Sharon's husband

SIMON HOFMAN Sharon's son

SASHA TSUROV Alias Simon Hofman

WANDA TSUROV Alias Sharon Hofman

NIASA CHARAZAVOUR Girlfriend of Simon Hofman, Israeli journalist

ISAAC WEISMAN Dentist in Haifa, Mitra's husband

The Iranians

DARIUS KHALEGHI RAZDI Chancellor to the Shah and Chairman of the Council of Elders

JAHAN FARIMAN Half-brother to Darius Razdi

CYRUS RAZDI Son of Darius Razdi

FATIMA RAZDI-YAZDIS	Third wife of Darius Razdi
MOHAMMED REZA-PAHLAVI	Shah of Persia
PRINCESS ASHRAF	Twin sister of the Shah
MOHAMMED MOSADDEQ	Doctor, Premier of Persia (Iran)
RUHOLLAH AL-KHOMEINI	Great Ayatollah, spiritual leader of The Islamic revolution
Others	
H. NORMAN SCHWARZKOPF	Brigadier-general, on special assignment for the CIA in Persia, father of Norman Schwarzkopf, Jr., future hero of the Gulf War
HOWARD W. PAGE	Director of Standard Oil of New Jersey (Exxon)
RICCARDO MATTEI	Personal bodyguard to Cyrus Razdi
DEAN McIVOR	Manager of Exxon Exploration Company
WILLIAM ANDRES	Vice-president of Exxon Corporation, Houston

BOOK I

The Creation

One

Tehran (Persia), August 16, 1953

The Sikorsky Hoverfly MK1 skimmed the cone of Mount Damavand, heading southeast towards Tehran. As the helicopter flew beyond the volcano, the downdrafts abated and the ride smoothed out.

Fariman, the pilot, relaxed and leaned back. The mountain peaks directly below him had been powdered with new snow during the night and glistened now in the morning sun. They stood in glaring contrast to Tehran, which was always a depressing sight from the air.

The Iranian capital, with its utilitarian apartment blocks and wretched little neighborhoods of clay huts and winding alleyways, sprawled for miles across the foothills of the Alborz Mountains. Even in the better parts of town, the streets and buildings lacked any character or charm. And to the south, everything was covered in the layer of fine yellow grit that blew in from the endless desert that started where the city stopped.

Fariman heard a clicking in his headphones. Then the voice of Lieutenant-Colonel Hassan, aide-de-camp to General Zahedi and liaison to the general staff of the Persian armed forces, blared in his ears. “*Come in, Coffee Grinder, Persian Lion here, do you read me?*”

Fariman reached up and turned down the volume. “Not so loud, Persian Lion. You’ll wake everyone.”

“What are your exact coordinates, Coffee Grinder?”

Fariman looked out through the windshield. In the distance he could see the sun’s rays glistening off the blue-green dome of the Sepahsalar Mosque.

“I guess I forgot my slide-rule, Persian Lion. But if you look up, you should be able to see me.”

It was silent for a moment. Then Lieutenant-Colonel Hassan’s voice came through again. “What is your ETA at Mehrabad Airport?”

Fariman tugged on the cyclic stick and swung out into a wide pass over the city. “Ten minutes. . . *If* I was planning to arrive there.”

“Hold on, Coffee Grinder, I have Chinvat on the line. I think the Chancellor has new instructions for you.” The Chancellor was Fariman’s older half-brother, Darius Razdi, who was celebrating his wedding at Chinvat, the family estate.

Fariman tried to reply, but got only static and the familiar hiss of an empty frequency. This was all getting more annoying by the minute. Why, he wondered, had Darius picked Hassan as his go-between? As a civilian flying his own aircraft, Fariman didn’t have to take orders from the aide-de-camp. Darius had just asked his brother to do him a favor and make a quick inspection of Tehran and the roads into the capital. It was a favor, all right: he had taken off from Chinvat a little over half an hour ago, right in the middle of a huge party there. His brother had just married the nineteen-year-old daughter of the Governor of Yazd, and everyone who was anyone in Persia had come to the wedding. Only the Shah himself was absent.

And of course Premier Mosaddeq and his National Front ministers. In an official communique, Mosaddeq had declined the invitation, saying he did not wish “to feast with the accomplices of the Western oil companies who have pressed the country into servitude and left the people hungry.” This insulting refusal had heated up political unrest to the boiling point, which was why Fariman was playing watchdog. Rioting could break out any moment.

“*Are you still there?*” Hassan’s voice boomed out again over the radio.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’m still here. I’m going to circle the city one last time, then I’m heading back to Chinvat.”

“Negative! Chancellor Razdi wants you to land at Mehrabad to refuel. What’s your fuel situation?”

Fariman glanced at the instrument panel. “Less than half a tank.”

“Just as I thought. The Chancellor wants you to return fully fueled.”

Fariman picked up his binoculars and eyed the surroundings of the airport. Thousands of people, carrying flags and banners, had gathered on Eisenhower and Mehrabad Avenues. “There’s a demonstration going on near there. I don’t think it’s a good idea to land at Mehrabad right now.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve just spoken to the airport commander. He says the situation is under control. You may land to refuel.”

“Shouldn’t I call Chinvat first? It’s strange that my brother--”

“Negative!” Hassan interrupted, overly forceful, it seemed. Then the aide-de-camp lowered his voice. “Listen. The radio is down at Chinvat. If you start trying to contact him, you’ll let all Persia know he’s in danger of being cut off from the rest of the world.”

“What do you mean, cut off? What about the phone?”

“If Mosaddeq calls a general strike, there won’t be any telephone either.”

“Well, okay, then. As long as you assume full responsibility.”

“If you insist. Just be sure to return to Chinvat with a full tank. Over and out.” The aide-de-camp went off the air with a click.

Fariman glanced over at the air force officer sitting next to him, who had come along as a scout. He was totally absorbed in photographing the crowds gathering below. His ear protectors had kept him from hearing the exchange with Hassan. Fariman tapped him on the shoulder. “We’re going to land,” he shouted, gesturing down at the airport.

The officer set his camera down and put on his headphones. “What for?”

“My brother wants us to refuel before coming back to Chinvat.” Fariman tuned the radio to the control tower frequency and pushed the call button. “Tower Mehrabad, this is India, Alpha, Alpha, Charlie. Request permission to land.”

The radio only crackled with static.

Fariman waited a moment, then repeated his request.

Suddenly a hoarse voice sounded in his headset: “India, Alpha, Alpha, Charlie, clear to land.”

Fariman peered down at the ground, aiming for the helipad. “The control tower seems pretty deserted,” he said to the officer.

“The streets around the airport sure aren’t,” the man replied nervously.

With his right hand on the cyclic control stick between his knees and his left on the collective pitch control, Fariman kept the chopper hovering about forty feet above the helipad. The small plaza outside the main entrance to the airport was mobbed with people; hundreds of men carrying banners and Iranian flags. Then Fariman saw the crowd clearing the way for a limousine, escorted by police on motorcycles and followed by a light armored police van.

When the little caravan turned onto the access road to the airport, Fariman made a decision. “I’m out of here,” he said. “I don’t like this.”

But before he had a chance to pull up on the collective stick, an open Landrover skidded to a halt below. Two airport policemen, both with beards and mirrored sunglasses, jumped out onto the tarmac and aimed their automatic weapons at the chopper. The driver climbed onto the hood and, waving two round signs over his head, ordered Fariman to land. His hair was blown every which way by the powerful downdraft from the rotors.

“Go. *Go!*” the air force officer hissed. “We’ll be out of range before those idiots can squeeze off a shot.”

But Fariman didn't feel like having his helicopter shot up. Bullets could do a lot of damage at this range, and he'd gone halfway around the world to get his hands on this old training helicopter, which he'd bought from the British. The former RAF squadron number, 675, still shone faintly through the green, white, and red imperial flag of Persia, with its lion, sun and sword in the middle.

Fariman eased the helicopter to the ground. Without turning off the engine, he slid open the window and stuck his head out. "What the hell's going on here?" he shouted.

The traffic controller looked angry. He made a slicing motion across his throat with the sign in his right hand: *Cut the engine.*

Seeing the policemen waving their machine guns menacingly, Fariman obeyed.

The traffic controller came a few steps closer, keeping his distance from the still-spinning rotors. "You'll have to get out. The airport's closed."

"For how long?" Fariman asked.

"I don't have a crystal ball."

"All I want is to refuel and take off again. I had permission from the airport commander."

The controller shrugged. "Then he'll have to drive the tanker over here himself. The ground crew is on strike."

"Shall I just take off again, then?"

Before the controller could answer, one of the policemen ran up and yanked open the door of the cockpit. "Get out. Quick!"

At gunpoint there was no argument. Fariman and his passenger climbed out. The policemen frisked them and motioned them into the Landrover. The traffic controller got behind the wheel, and as he pulled away, Fariman saw the two men in sunglasses searching the Sikorsky. "What's the big fuss?" he asked.

“Security measures,” the controller answered. “Dr. Mohammed Mosaddeq”—he intoned the Premier’s name with the devotion of a newly ordained priest--“is giving a press conference for foreign journalists in the first-class lounge. Then he will address the nation by radio from here at the airport.” The last sentence was spoken with obvious pride. “All air traffic is suspended until the general strike is over.” He parked the Landrover in front of a white stucco administration building. Loudspeakers above them were blasting out inflammatory slogans and martial music, as a prelude to the premier’s speech.

When they climbed out of the car, Fariman asked, “Where can I make a call?”

“You can’t. All the phones are down.”

Fariman nodded as it dawned on him that General Zahedi’s aide-de-camp had lured him into a trap.

Dr. Mohammed Mosaddeq sat bent over like a chess player, his face close to the microphone, his bony hands folded over the head of his cane. His sallow skin stretched tight across his cheekbones, his silvery hair as thin as the tufts on a newborn’s scalp. He was a masterful orator, who used the glaring contrast between his emaciated body and his penetrating, sonorous voice to full advantage.

On this morning of August 16, 1953, he held the most emotional speech of his political career. He accused Shah Reza Pahlevi of being putty in the hands of Darius Khaleghi Razdi and his Supreme Council of the Kingdom of Persians, a clique of conservative conspirators who had sold themselves to the international reactionary powers (veryone knew Mosaddeq meant the CIA and the British secret service). And these rightwing demons were prepared once again to prostitute the riches of Iran’s soil to the British and

the Americans. To pull off their insane and evil scheme, they had urged the Shah to dismiss Mosaddeq and his cabinet, so the country's leadership would fall to their disciple, General Fazzolah Zahedi. He was simply lying in wait, having gone into hiding a few months earlier when the government dismissed him for subversive activities.

In turn shaking with rage, wracked with sobs, like an actor on the stage, Mosaddeq swore that he would never, never, give in to the imperialists who were out to humiliate the Iranian people. He exhorted the whole country to demonstrate en masse. Better to blow the oil wells sky high than to allow Downing Street and the White House to rob Persia of its natural riches any longer.

Even before the two-hour speech was over, the extra editions of the Communist papers, plastered with anti-Shah propaganda, had hit the streets. Crowds were now swarming into the city, defacing the Shah's name as they marched. They overran the most strategic places in the capital, occupying the central post office, the state-run radio station, the telephone exchanges and the main government offices. The Shah's portrait was seized from shops, and movie theaters, and from prominent places along the streets, and burned. Anyone known to oppose Mosaddeq was brought out and beaten. As the riot raged around them, the police and the army remained hidden in their barracks.

Hundreds of farmers and workers gathered on the Asiatic exhibition grounds at the northwestern edge of town, arriving in trucks requisitioned from British Petroleum, formerly called the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Armed with staves and daggers, picks and bicycle chains, they marched down Tabandeh Avenue to Evin Baraken prison, smashing, burning, looting as they went. By the time they arrived, the mob was so huge that the guards simply threw open the gates and ran. The demonstrators plundered the prison's munitions supplies and, to deafening cheers, released hundreds of political

prisoners from their cells. Some had been tortured so badly they had to be held upright.

The rebel leader climbed onto the hood of a Ford truck and spoke to the people. Loudspeakers distorted and amplified his clipped phrases into a thundering tirade. He jabbed his finger in the air, pointing up to the green foothills of the Alborz Mountains. “There, beyond Shemiran, on the plains of Darband-- where it’s cool in the summer, while down here it is hotter than hell itself-- there lives Darius Khaleghi Razdi, a cruel and ambitious man, the right hand of Shah Reza Pahlavi, the worst traitor of them all.”

The crowd screamed curses.

“Today Darius Razdi is celebrating his wedding,” the speaker went on. “The guests at his feast are those who exploit the people. They are the princes and governors, the officials and the ambassadors, the bankers and traders, the mullahs and the ayatollahs. They are squandering our oil and plotting to make Iran an American colony.”

“Death to Darius Razdi!” the laborers screamed, clenched fists raised above their heads.

Following a caravan of trucks filled with newly released prisoners, the rebellious crowd began moving uphill toward Darband Plateau, toward Chinvat, toward Darius Razdi. When the front lines reached Malek Pur, they saw a Bentley coming down the hill. The curtains were drawn and a chauffeur in livery was at the wheel. When he caught sight of the demonstrators, he tried to escape by turning down Golab Darreh, but at Qasem Square, just before the mausoleum of Emamzadeh Qasem, the crowd forced him off the road with their trucks. They dragged the chauffeur from behind the wheel and kicked him until he fell to the ground unconscious. Others wrenched open the back doors. A mullah, dressed in a tight-fitting aba and a snowy white turban, huddled fearfully in the far corner of the backseat.

His wild, henna-stained beard and bushy eyebrows told them immediately that this was the mullah of Resvanieh. Some of the newly released prisoners went ballistic: this was the same mullah who had sentenced many of them to religious torture in recent months.

The rebel leader leaned into the limousine and ripped off the mullah's white turban. In its stead, he pulled a black cloth from under his tunic and wrapped it haphazardly around the holy man's head, then pulled his struggling quarry out of the car by his beard. With his friends' help the leader hoisted the trembling mullah onto the hood of the Bentley, so that he could be seen by the crowd coming up behind them on foot.

"The mullah of Resvanieh!" the leader shouted. "A false sayyid!" The mullah of Resvanieh wasn't a sayyid, which meant he wasn't one of the direct descendants of Mohammed. Therefore he wasn't entitled to wear the black turban. Anyone who wore the black cloth without being a true sayyid belonged to those "whose blood must be spilt."

A thundering wave of hatred rolled through the crowd. The people were thirsty for blood. The angry prisoners ripped the clothes from the mullah's body and threw them into a burning food stand. They tore a door off the mausoleum and bound him to it face down.

"Bastinado," came the cry from all around. A bastinado meant at least four hundred blows to the soles of the feet. It was the mullah's favorite form of torture.

They bent his legs up and lashed his big feet with wire against his skinny buttocks, binding him so tightly that the metal cut deep into the skin and made him look as though he was wearing garters of blood. A steelworker from Beshshahr stumbled up, supported on both sides by his former cellmates. He was one of the few prisoners from Evin who had survived a bastinado.

The rebels danced with excitement as the steelworker shook off the helping hands. He held clenched in his fist a chain sheathed in a rubber hose. “Remember, mullah? Flagellation is a blessing from Allah. You said so yourself.”

The mullah pleaded, babbling promises of immeasurable riches and safe passage through the gates of paradise. But the rubber hose came hissing down through the air and smacked against the bare soles of his feet. The mullah’s naked body spasmed. At the same time, so did his punisher’s, as a jolt of withering pain shot up from his own shattered soles through his spine, searing his brain. With every lash, he screamed in chorus with the mullah, while the crowd roared and counted the blows, until the steelworker finally collapsed from pain and exhaustion. One of his fellow prisoners took over, and the pulsating howls of the crowd mutated into a cry for their beloved leader, the man who had stood up for them against the foreign extortionists and the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, and the spineless Shah and the religious leaders who had betrayed them: “*Mosaddeq! Mosaddeq! Mosaddeq!*”

The chant swept like a monsoon over the rooftops and up the slopes, until it breached the spacious galleries of Darius Razdi’s palace and saturated the complacent conversation among the Persian elite and their foreign guests.

Two

Chinvat (Tehran), August 16, 1953

The great crescent of the Alborz Mountains rises like a high, steep wall dividing two worlds. On the side facing toward the Caspian Sea, a road traverses Tharis Pass at 10,000 feet and plunges down across steep, wooded slopes into a subtropical jungle--a place where bears and tigers still roamed in the year 1953. On the Tehran side, the road descends across the Darband plateau and the gardens of Shemiran to the miserable city, a world of stone, sand and stinking poverty, cold in winter and unbearably hot in summer.

Chinvat, the estate where Darius Khaleghi Razdi was celebrating his third wedding on August 16, 1953, covered the entire habitable portion of the Darband plateau. The boundaries of the steep, trapezoid-shaped property were the slopes of Mt. Tharis to the north and a deep ravine to the south, called Darband Gorge. The estate lay 5,700 feet above sea level, and strategically situated a good 500 yards above the city of Tehran.

Due to the great difference in elevation between the city's northern and southern reaches, the terraces of Chinvat, overlooking beautiful green gardens amid glimmering pools, enjoyed pleasant spring weather in the afternoons. Below in the old city, however, the air was like a blast furnace, reeking with the stench of urine and feces from open sewers in the poor neighborhoods, and with the smoke of burning dung heaps at the southern edge of town.

A towering wall twelve feet high surrounded the Chinvat estate, edged with blue glazed tiles and decorated at regular intervals with multi-colored

mosaics depicting Nader Shah's campaign to distant Delhi in 1739, where he had wrested the celebrated Peacock Throne from the Grand Moguls. The wall had once been part of the great marble palace of pillars built by Razdi's great-grandfather in the mid-nineteenth century. Seventy-five years later the palace had been destroyed by fire and then rebuilt, but the mile-long buttressed wall remained intact.

The original decorations underscored Darius Razdi's direct descent from the famous general. He himself was hazarapatish, commander of the Ten Thousand Immortals, an elite corps that provided the soldiers for the Royal Guard. Traditionally, the hazarapatish was also chancellor to the king, and a man of enormous power.

Despite the unstable situation in the country, almost everyone who was anyone in the Iran of 1953 had come to Chinvat. Fully-armed palace guards, one hundred strong, remained on alert to guarantee their safety, and Darius Razdi had reinforced his personal troops with two crack commando units from the Iranian national army. While the palace guard remained within the wall of the estate, the vast majority of soldiers had taken up positions outside the sections to the east and west, where the estate was less protected by the natural lay of the land. Outside the main gate, forged with bull-men carrying a winged sun, stood a radio car and two Fox scout cars with open gunner's sights. These fast, armored reconnaissance vehicles carried powerful 30-mm cannons.

The lieutenant in charge of the two commando units was leaning against the radio car, wearing headphones and talking in undertones into a microphone. Most of his troops were idle, sitting with their legs draped over their gun turrets or squatting together in little groups. They smoked and played dominoes, but the sounds of the festivities filtered out to them, luring their attention. Sounds engendered by the pleasures reserved for the rich and powerful.

The women were holding their own wedding party in the andarun, a building situated off in an isolated corner of the huge garden and connected to the main building by a pillared walkway. The food for their wedding party lay on shimmering silk tablecloths, which were spread on the grass under green canopies. While they ate, the women made a deafening racket.

The men's party in the drawing rooms of the main building was much quieter. Once the mantra, the formal wedding vows, had been pronounced, Darius Razdi stood ready to accept congratulations from his prominent guests. He was dressed in a black doeskin coat with black silk lapels, a high collar and a narrow bow tie. His thick head of hair--silver-gray ever since he'd turned forty--was neatly trimmed, yet stubborn curls protruded from beneath his Oriental fez, which had no tassel. At a little over six feet, he was an impressive-looking man, radiating power and an arrogant confidence born of ancestral authority and entitlement. Yet despite the haughty manner, he exuded the charisma of a superior leader.

When the receiving line ended, Darius had himself photographed with his most important guests, his face expressionless. The less important guests stood around in little groups, eating the quail eggs and peacock tongues the servants brought around, or drinking cognac and smoking cigars. Once the last picture had been taken, Razdi wound his way through the clusters of people, his walking stick clutched under his arm like a field marshal's baton. The quiet conversations around him were a synthesis of the turbulent events that had occurred in Iran in the three-and-some years since Dr. Mosaddeq had set up the National Front.

The Front was a coalition between those who held the political mandate of the clergy and the merchants of the bazaar, and had been set up to achieve one common goal: nationalization of the country's oil concessions, a purpose that drew strong support from the communist-backed Tudah Party. Thus it came as no surprise when all of the National Front candidates were elected at

the very next vote, granting them a majority in the Majles, the Iranian parliament. But shortly after forming the new government, their premier was murdered by a religious fanatic. His place was taken by Mosaddeq, who four weeks later signed a bill nationalizing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. It wreaked havoc in the oil-producing world. For Iran it was at first an unmitigated disaster. Great Britain organized a worldwide boycott of Iranian oil exports and used its embassy in Tehran to instigate one intrigue after another aimed at bringing down the reformist regime, all of which resulted in explosive confrontations among the Shah, Premier Mosaddeq, and the Majles. Conspiracies and rioting were the order of the day. Prices and unemployment soared.

While they talked, the prominent guests cast furtive glances in the direction of Darius Razdi. Though only forty-three, the Chancellor had the willing ear of Shah Reza Pahlavi, and, rumor had it, ties with the CIA as well. Someone had heard that Allen Dulles, director of the CIA, had flown to Geneva the week before for a brief vacation, and had met there with Princess Ashraf, the Shah's domineering twin sister. Darius Razdi arrived in the Swiss city the very same day, supposedly for a visit to the ophthalmologist--Razdi, who had never been sick a day in his life! The guests conjectured in whispers as to what exactly had transpired in that illustrious conference town. Many of them saw Razdi as the power behind the scenes, and the only one they could pin their hopes on to restore law and order in this seething country. Yes, Darius Razdi was a feared and respected man.

In the doorway to the gallery, the prince of Zoroaster stood ramrod-straight, his hands folded defiantly over the silver head of his walking stick. He was very much aware of the awe he inspired from those around him, and he revelled in it.

Suddenly Captain Kzan, the skinny, pockmarked commander of the palace guard, appeared next to him to pass on the latest reports on the situation.

“There’s a general strike going on,” the captain explained urgently, his eyes wide with alarm. He was sweating with anxiety. “The trains have stopped running and the airport is still closed. The entire telephone network has been knocked out. The national radio keeps broadcasting a speech by Dr. Mosaddeq.”

But Razdi remained impassive. “The radio station is the only thing he controls. By organizing these mass demonstrations in his favor, he’s just trying to impose his will on the Shah and the parliament. It’s not the first time something like this has happened.”

“But this time it looks like it’s getting out of hand, Shazdeh.” Shazdeh was the form of address reserved for princes and royal heirs. “There’s rioting everywhere.”

“Well, then, so far everything is going according to plan.”

“Not exactly, Shazdeh,” Kzan said, tugging nervously at the sleeves of his tunic. “With the short circuit in the radio room and the phone lines down, we’re totally cut off. If anything goes wrong, I can’t even reach the general staff for reinforcements.”

Razdi gave him a threatening stare. “What do you mean, if something goes wrong?”

“Well, for example,” the man stammered, “if the demonstrators head out this way.”

“Don’t be stupid, Kzan. There’s enough firepower here in Chinvat to blow away Mosaddeq’s entire band of followers. And we’re not isolated at all. If we need reinforcements, Ghaffani can call them in on his field set.” Lieutenant Ghaffani was the leader of the commandos.

“But he claims he’s having trouble with his transmitter. He says it’s because of the high walls and the mountains.”

Razdi rolled his eyes in disgust. “That’s ridiculous. He can hook up to our antenna, and if that doesn’t work he can drive the radio car down the hill to where he *can* transmit.”

“Of course, Shazdeh. But he insists he can’t. If you ask me, he’s in with the bolsheviks.”

Razdi frowned. He had entrusted the selection of the soldiers stationed here today to Lieutenant-Colonel Hassan, Zahedi’s aide de camp, who was the link to the whole Persian army. Razdi had assumed he could count on Hassan’s loyalty—and that of the men he chose.

“Could I make a suggestion, Shazdeh?”

“What.”

“That you go to Ramsar right away, while you still can. You’ll be safe there on the Caspian in your villa. And you’re right there next to the Shah’s summer palace, which is protected by the Royal Guard. At least they’re reliable. His Royal Highness Shah Reza Pahlavi arrived in Ramsar last night.”

Razdi angrily drummed his fingers on the head of his walking stick. “I know that,” he said through clenched teeth. Ever since the disturbances began, the Shah had become increasingly paranoid, and lived in constant fear of assassination. He barely left the palace these days and slept with a Smith & Wesson under his pillow. Sometimes he even changed bedrooms in the middle of the night, just to stay a step ahead of his own palace guard.

The Shah had agreed to give a speech on the radio last night, in which he was supposed to warn the mullahs and military leaders against a left-wing putsch with Mosaddeq behind it. But at the last moment the Shah got cold feet and fled with Queen Soraya.

The speech was supposed to signal the start of Operation Azadi, a covert plan that Razdi had indeed cooked up with Dulles on his trip to Switzerland. Also present at that meeting was General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the CIA's case officer and former wartime commander of the Royal Iranian Guard. Before he left his post in 1948, it was rumored that he used CIA funds to set up a network of reliable operatives working within the Iranian police and the army.

“Shah Reza Pahlavi needs your support, Shazdeh,” Kzan was saying. “It's really best if you join him until Operation Azadi is over. The guests can decide for themselves what they want to do: either follow us in their own cars, or stay here under the protection of the palace guard until the situation clears up. The commandos will go with us, in convoy, with an armored car and personnel carriers at front and back.”

“Right through the mountains? That's crazy!”

“We can go by way of Rasht. It's a long way, but the road is passable.”

Razdi growled something under his breath. He stalked to the terrace balustrade, Kzan in his wake, and let his eyes roam over the city.

Along the southern perimeter of the city there was the usual cloud of filthy smoke above the dung heaps. But to the east he saw a bad sign: there was no smoke at all coming from the stacks at the brick factory or the Shomali works. Even the flame above the oil refinery had been extinguished. And in the central sector of town, he could see crowds of people pushing and shoving their way through the streets and squares, heading for the Meidun-é Sepah, the large plaza surrounded by government offices and graced with gardens and ponds. It was also where the Shah's Gustan Palace was located. It looked like Mosaddeq's call to demonstrate had apparently found a willing public.

Razdi bit at the ends of his moustache, which curled down over his upper lip. The Shah may not have delivered his speech, but that didn't mean Operation Azadi would fail.

The plan was simple. Following the speech, Schwarzkopf was supposed to spread the rumor in government circles that the Shah had signed a decree relieving the premier of his duties and that Mosaddeq would be replaced by General Zahedi, a loyalist currently in hiding. Mosaddeq would be sure to attack the decree with his usual harangues, inciting mass demonstrations and hooliganism. Meanwhile Schwarzkopf would move agents into place to organize counter-demonstrations and provoke street riots. Generals loyal to the Shah would then accuse Mosaddeq of attempting to overthrow the government and, to save the country from anarchy, would intervene, throw Mosaddeq in prison, and install General Zahedi as the new premier.

Razdi turned to Kzan. "Still no news from Schwarzkopf?"

"But that would be impossible, Shazdeh. The messenger with your note to the General only left a few minutes ago." Kzan saw that Razdi was about to ream him out for this, and quickly added: "I gave your memo to the mullah of Resvanieh. The rabble won't harass a holy man like him."

Razdi nodded. "I suppose not." His fingers tightened on the head of his walking stick. Before the telephone lines went down he had spoken to Hassan and chewed him out because the military leaders had not proceeded with their part of the plan and confronted Mossadeq. The aide-de-camp blamed it all on the Shah's hasty departure, which had caused confusion and arguments among the high command. Razdi then ordered his message to be taken to Schwarzkopf at the American Embassy, urging him to have the generals on his payroll act immediately. In Iran, it wasn't enough to just hand out money; sometimes the only way to get anything done was to give people a good kick in the ass.

Kzan cleared his throat to get Razdi's attention.

“Yes!” he snapped. “What is it?”

“I also told the mullah to have Schwarzkopf send someone to the airport to get Mr. Fariman’s helicopter cleared for takeoff.”

Razdi relented a little with a nod. “Good going.” One of the scouts had reported seeing Fariman’s helicopter land at Mehrabad. Razdi had no idea what he was doing there, but he was obviously being detained.

Although Fariman was his half-brother, except for their speckled, gray-green eyes, there was little to indicate which parent they had in common. In the large portrait of the half-brothers hanging above the mantel at Chinvat, Darius stood tall and broad-shouldered. With his square chin and penetrating, skeptical glance, Razdi seemed possessed of a personal power equal to his physical strength. Beside him, the wiry, smaller-framed Fariman, with his elegant clothing and softer features, seemed almost small and weak.

The two men also differed in their upbringing and education. They’d had the same father, who until his death in 1942 had been Minister of War under Reza Khan. But only Darius Razdi had received a military education. Razdi’s mother was from an old Zoroastrian clan, while Fariman’s mother belonged to a vastly wealthy Kadjar family. Their father had seen to it that both of them were brought up in the essential tenets of Zoroastrian mythology, but the strictest attention was reserved for Darius. He was predestined to be a high priest, and at the age of thirteen was initiated into the secret method for preparing haoma, a hallucinogenic drink that induced a feeling of spiritual and physical immortality. Historians have long speculated as to just which plant was used to brew this intoxicating beverage. Today, the general consensus is that it was a variety of ephedra, a medicinal herb that grows in the mountains of Iran and Pakistan.

Just as all things within their religion manifested themselves in opposing forces - light and darkness, life and death - so the two brothers had grown to occupy opposite ends of the spectrum. Darius completed his education at the

Académie Militaire d'Autriche in Tehran, a military school for the sons of the Persian aristocracy. At the age of twenty-five, he had already helped to crush an ecclesiastical uprising, which launched his climb up through the ranks. Fariman, however, who was fifteen years younger, was sent to the University of Texas at the age of eighteen to study geology. In the process of becoming Americanized, however, he became much more interested in airplanes and everything aeronautical than in petroleum sediment.

Despite these vast differences, the half-brothers had a bond that ran much deeper than could be accounted for by traditional Persian family values. The powerful Darius Razdi, high priest of Zarathustra—the Greek name for Zoroaster, Persian prophet of the sixth century B.C.--and leader of the Supreme Council of the Kingdom of Persians, had many subordinates but few friends. The only person he trusted enough to confide in, to reveal his secret hopes and dreams, was his younger brother. Fariman was his sounding board, his inner voice. As for Fariman, he revered his older brother as the Immortal Holy One. On top of all this was the fact that Fariman was Darius' heir--at least until Darius produced a son of his own.

Razdi stared searchingly at Kzan. "So you don't think we can't count on our commando leader, Ghaffani?"

Kzan shook his head. "You'd think he was here to spy on us rather than protect us. He's in there all the time with the headphones, listening to a radio that isn't supposed to work."

Razdi nodded curtly, the flash of anger in his eyes the only sign that he found Kzan's explanation convincing. "Go bring him to my study. And don't let him out of your sight. Are you armed?"

"Uh... no, Shazdeh."

"Well, you'd better be."

“Of course, Shazdeh.” Kzan made to leave, but Razdi held out his walking stick against the man’s chest to detain him. “Do we have more than one radio in the house?”

“We have the two broken transmitters, but the receivers are still intact. One’s in the servants’ quarters and the other’s in the andarun.”

“Tune one into Radio Baghdad, and have someone listen to their news broadcasts. That may tell us more about the situation in Tehran than the Iranian state radio. Those idiots only broadcast what Mosaddeq tells them to.”

“Good idea, Shazdeh.”

Razdi saw Kzan hesitating. “Well? Is there something else?”

“Shall I announce that the arusi will be postponed, Shazdeh?” Kzan was referring to the traditional celebration that began as soon as the bride and groom had withdrawn to spend their wedding night together.

“No!” Razdi barked. “Absolutely not. Everyone of influence in Iran has been brought here today so that I can keep an eye on them until Zahedi is installed. If we send them home now, some of them might decide to join with Mosaddeq.” He gave Kzan a stiff smile. “And this business about running away to Ramsar is bullshit. I’m not going anywhere. Understand?” He was drumming his walking stick on the floor. “I’m not going anywhere! As soon as Schwarzkopf gets my message, he’ll send us the right backup.” He patted Kzan’s leg with the stick. “Now move it!”

The captain jumped to attention, and marched off like a frantic wind-up toy.

Razdi glanced around him. “Besides,” he muttered to himself, “I’m not about to have my wedding night ruined by that damned Mosaddeq.”

There was another, more personal reason for him not to delay the wedding feast. He had been married twice before and, in keeping with tradition, chose his first two wives from the daughters of one his father’s

older brothers. This worn-out custom had provided him with five mentally handicapped daughters and a stillborn son. Razdi was tired of defying chromosomes and heredity, and decided it was high time that he provided himself with a male successor. Not that there was any reason to question his virility: as far as libido was concerned, he was a match for the biggest wrestler in the Royal Guard. No, it was that he wanted to see his son grow up, wanted to teach him to ride and hunt ibex with him in the hills of Shemiran. And most of all he wanted to educate him in the doctrines of Zarathustra. His son would need to know that the universe was divided into two rival camps: the good belonging to the god Ahura Mazda, the evil one to his foe, Angra Mainyu. Darius Razdi hoped to offer his boy the opportunity to choose the right camp.

So he had selected his new bride with care. Fatima was nineteen, a daughter of the governor of Yazd, and raised in the strictest Shi'ite traditions. She hadn't made a peep when she was informed that she was to be the third wife of a man she had never seen before. She was not especially attractive, and she never went out in public without her chador, the long veil worn by Moslem women that covers their entire body. Like most Iranian women, within the confines of the household she could let loose a sharp tongue, but she was intelligent. And best of all, she was broad in the hips--she was born to breed children--and she came from a family that produced mostly boys.

Razdi turned his concentration back to the conversations around him. Amid the knot of guests closest to him, a Greek shipping magnate was roundly criticizing the mess the National Front had made. The tycoon had had special tankers built to take on oil at Abadan for the former Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, but the oil boycott forced his ships to sit idle at dockside. He was ready, he exclaimed, to tear Mosaddeq to pieces. He called the Iranian premier a "mad extremist" who held inflammatory press conferences in his pajamas, lying on a divan. "I remember him the way he

was in 1950,” the rich man said, “when I saw him at the re-interment of Shah Reza’s father, shuffling along behind the coffin with the rest of the Majles.” He laughed scornfully. “Just a skinny, stooped old man with a sunken yellow face and a runny nose he didn’t even bother to wipe.”

“But the crowds were out there cheering him,” the French economic attaché countered. “When the British delegation walked by, everyone raised their fists. And it’s no different now. Iran may have run into a crisis after Mosaddeq nationalized the oil concessions, but the Iranian people still think he’s the greatest.”

“These idiot nationalists have no concept of gratitude,” another man broke in, his clipped words full of condescension. It was William Snow, the CFO of British Petroleum. Thanks to Mosaddeq’s meddling, BP had been forced to change its name from Anglo-Iranian after losing the exclusive rights to the national concessions. “Really, if it hadn’t been for British know-how and British money, oil would never have been found in Iran.”

“Ah, but you take a purely colonialist standpoint,” the Frenchman said. “Iran has paid back those investments a thousand times over. You forget that in 1950 Anglo-Iranian earned five times as much off Iran’s oil fields as Iran did itself. And that same year, the company paid more taxes to the British government on its profits than it paid Iran for the whole three-year period before. I’d call that exploitation.”

“That’s rot,” Snow retorted. “The Iranians will never be able to manage their own oil industry, let alone develop it. The proof is right there in front of you. Ever since they chased the British out of the country, not a drop of oil has been pumped through the pipelines. Not to mention seventy thousand Iranians are out of work.”

“But only because the British are boycotting sales of Iranian oil,” the Frenchman protested. He noticed that Darius Razdi was listening. “And what is your opinion, Agha Razdi?” he asked.

“It’s not just about oil revenues,” Razdi said. “For us, it’s also about who will run things in this country from now on. The British? The Russians? The Americans? Or the Iranians themselves? I can understand that you Westerners are afraid that the nationalization trend will spread to Saudi Arabia, but--”

A deafening shout, barely human, followed by a chilling echo, stopped everyone cold as it reverberated through the compound. It arose from the city below. The guests looked at each other in shock, but before anyone could speak they were startled by yet another hair-raising sound: the thunder of thousands of voices screaming in unison, triumphant and merciless, like the blood-roar of spectators at a bullfight. The primitive cry became a pulsating death chant, clashing like the cymbals on Ashura that mark the intervals at which hysterical Shi’ites flagellate themselves until the blood flows--for some until they die.

“Mosaddeq! Mosaddeq! Mosaddeq!”

Razdi’s guests thronged to the balustrades. A few hundred yards below them they saw a frenzied crowd on Qasem Square, standing around a naked man who had been tied to a plank. Despite the distance, they clearly measure the brutal strength with which the lash was applied.

“A bastinado,” they told each other with that indifference typical of an elite that never knew the wrong end of the lash.

The guests began murmuring assurances to each other: public lashings and executions were needed to keep the rabble in line. This time, though, they noted with some alarm, the public torture was being used to whip the masses up to new heights of bloodlust, a method quite common in Iran.

They saw Darius Razdi approaching and fell silent. Respectfully they stepped aside and gave him room at the balustrade.

Razdi saw at a glance that the limousine being mobbed by the crowd was the Bentley belonging to the mullah of Resvanieh. He called for a pair of

binoculars and, training them on the limo, recognized the matted reddish hair and beard of the naked body tied to the door.

After each series of lashes, the victim was untied and forced to walk around on his broken feet. This would restore circulation, thus maximizing the pain when the lashing resumed.

Razdi groaned softly--not out of any pity for the mullah, but because this meant his message would not reach Schwarzkopf. He shifted the binoculars to a view of Meidun-é Sepah and the premier's residence. The streets were black with people. He could also see huge crowds at the mosques of Emam Hosein and Sepahsalar. The rabble had taken over the streets of Tehran.

He erased the scene in a blur of movement, zeroing in on the marching fields and modern barracks along Sarbaz Street, where Tehran's military garrison was quartered. He saw, to his relief, a line of military vehicles moving towards the Kurosh-é Kabir Road. When they reached the road, they split into two convoys. Most of them headed south, towards the royal palace at Golestan. The others - Razdi counted two Fox scout cars and four three-ton trucks with open beds and machine guns mounted on the roof - started uphill, towards Chinvat.

He lowered the binoculars. So one army detachment was already on the move. But for whom? The Shah or the premier?

"Shazdeh?" It was Captain Kzan, who was standing behind him.

Razdi whirled around and barked at his henchman: "What the hell are you doing here? I told you to take the lieutenant to the library and keep him there."

The captain kept his cool. "He is in the library, Shazdeh. Two guards are with him. I just wanted to pass on the latest reports to you."

"And what might they be?" Razdi asked, barely keeping a lid on his exasperation.

“Radio Tehran is down to broadcasting either martial music or Mosaddeq’s speeches. Radio Baghdad, though, says Mosaddeq’s followers have attempted a coup, but General Zahedi has taken charge of the troops loyal to the Shah and they are busy making a clean sweep of the city.”

“Very good.” Razdi turned back and took another look through the binoculars at the army unit that was slowly approaching. He figured these had to be Zahedi’s troops. He handed the binoculars to Kzan. “Okay, let’s go.”

Kzan didn’t budge. “Yessir, but there are conflicting reports. Another newscast says there’s total anarchy in Tehran, and that it isn’t clear yet just whose side the army is on.”

As if to confirm his words, the people’s chant once again echoed up over the mountain’s flank.

“Mosaddeq! Mosaddeq! Mosaddeq!”

Razdi snatched the binoculars back from Kzan. The little column of army vehicles had reached the rioters on Qasem Square, but there was no sign of a confrontation. From various quarters, shouts of triumph could be heard. Civilians swarmed onto the turrets of the armored vehicles and into the open beds of the military trucks--and embraced the soldiers. These weren’t Zahedi’s reinforcements. These were traitors.

Words like “revolution” and “uprising” spread like brushfire among the guests.

“Silence! Please!” Razdi’s voice was harsh and imperious. “I have just received reports that Dr. Mosaddeq has attempted to overthrow the government with the support of radical nationalists and the communist-supported Tudah party. I am confident that the Royal Army will remain loyal to Shah Reza Pahlavi and make short work of this rebellion.”

An agitated murmur rose among the guests. To command their attention Razdi brought his walking stick down with a crashing boom on a copper coffee table.

Dead silence ensued. He continued. "There is a possibility, however, that the mob out there in Qasem Square will head this way. Rumor has it that a few army mutineers have joined them. They know that the country's finest is gathered here today, and they may try to take us hostage. Should they attempt to do so, we will fend them off. This house is a fortress. With the detachment of paratroopers at our disposal, it is unassailable.

"But we must," he went on, "give the soldiers a helping hand." Razdi searched the faces of those of his wedding guests who were compatriots, his eyes hard and glittering. "We Iranians have always been excellent hunters. You are all skilled marksmen. You can shoot down anyone who tries to climb over the wall. In a moment, Captain Kzan will pass out rifles and ammunition. Of course this does not apply to our foreign guests. I would like to ask them to go to the kitchen complex in the cellar, where they will be safe. My apologies for the inconvenience." He looked each of his countrymen in the eye, forcefully, ready for a fight. Then he slammed his cane down on the copper table for the second time. "Men of Persia," he snarled, "here is your golden opportunity to show who is on God's side!"

He handed the binoculars back to Kzan. "Be sure someone keeps track of what's going on down there, and keep me informed. I'm going to the library."

Then he barreled his way through the crowd, ignoring the questions fired at him from all sides.

The walls of the spacious library were lined with rare books and costly ancient Persian miniatures. The room was furnished with calfskin armchairs with side tables. A desk, its surface made of fine inlaid wood, stood on a dais before a window that looked out on the snowy peaks of the Alborz.

The lieutenant was a lanky man in his late thirties with watery eyes the dull brown of a wet autumn afternoon. He stood waiting with a bored

expression in the center of the room, flanked by two palace guards, who leaped to attention when Razdi entered. The lieutenant tapped two fingers to the brim of his kepi in a casual salute.

Razdi walked past him without a word, stepped up onto the dais, and stood behind his desk. His very presence radiated danger. “Name?” he demanded.

The officer straightened his shoulders in an attempt to look taller. “Lieutenant Ghaffani,” he said.

“I hear you are having trouble communicating with headquarters.”

Ghaffani nodded with a shrug. “The field set is one of those Russian jobs. Probably used during the siege of Stalingrad. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.”

Without taking his eyes off Ghaffani, Razdi reached down and opened the middle drawer of his desk. “And when it does work, what kind of messages come out of it?”

Ghaffani refused to look up at Razdi, instead letting his gaze come to rest on one of the miniatures. “Military chit-chat. Nothing special.”

“Nothing about Mosaddeq’s attempted coup and the communists of the Tudah party?”

“I know only that my specific orders are to take absolutely no action against anyone, except on command from my immediate superiors.”

Razdi raised his eyebrows. “Really. No action. None? Not even against the gang of rioters that looks like it’s on its way up here?”

Ghaffani was staring intently at the miniature, which pictured the mystery of the Gate of Darkness. “Theoretically, no.”

“In other words, if we were to be attacked, your men would not intervene?”

“Those are my orders.”

“And you see no reason to ask your immediate superior, Colonel Hassan, for further instructions?”

“I don’t believe I would be able to make radio contact. The walls are quite high, you know.”

“What about having the radio car drive down to Darband Bridge? There’s nothing to interfere with good radio contact down there. I could send two of my own men along. They can take up direct contact with the commander in chief of the armed forces.”

Without taking his eyes off the miniature, the lieutenant said: “In the army, one must follow the chain of command.”

“You are so right. Who is second in command in your detachment?”

“Gambiz, my adjutant.”

“And have you explained your orders to him?”

Ghaffani suddenly lost interest in the Gate of Darkness. “Excuse me?” he said, looking at Razdi.

“I asked you whether your adjutant knows of your orders not to become involved in any fighting.”

“No. As far as he knows, orders are still to provide protection for you and your guests.”

“Good,” Razdi said, as if he were announcing checkmate. “Then I hereby relieve you of your command.” His right hand slipped into the open drawer.

A mocking smile formed on Ghaffani’s lips, but vanished when Razdi pointed the business end of a huge Colt revolver at him. “If I were you, Shazdeh, I would put down that weapon,” he murmured cautiously. “You could cause an accident.”

Razdi looked at the revolver, then at Ghaffani. “Yes, you’re right. It is a rather dangerous gadget.”

Ghaffani spoke up with more assurance. “You realize I am only doing my duty, Shazdeh. Premier Mosaddeq has forbidden us to take up arms against our own people.”

“And you plan to obey him. Even if it costs you your life?”

“You can’t shoot me, Shazdeh. My men would kill you if anything happened to me.”

Razdi gave him a cynical smile. “You really think so?” He pulled back the hammer.

Ghaffani suddenly realized that this was no game. “Hey, wait a minute,” he said. He held up his palms as if to ward off the bullet. “If you put it that way, you can take the radio car wherever you want. If you want to use the radio to talk to Arfa’s aide-de-camp, or to Zahedi, it makes no difference to me.”

“Too late,” Razdi said. “You should have thought of that earlier.”

He pulled the trigger.

The report was deafening within the confines of the room. Ghaffani was knocked back off his feet. His head hit the floor with a hollow thump. He rolled onto his side and pulled his legs up in a cramp, writhing and clutching his abdomen.

Razdi waved the revolver peremptorily at one of the guards. “Go get Gambiz, the adjutant. On the double!”

In his hurry to get out of there, the guard almost tripped over his own feet.

Razdi put the revolver down on the desk and lit a cigar. He blew out a thin stream of smoke and stood there musing, listening to the gasping breath of the lieutenant.

When Gambiz entered the library a few minutes later, Razdi looked up. “Good afternoon,” he said almost cheerfully.

The adjutant froze, staring in disbelief at his commander lying on the floor. “What happened?” he stammered.

Razdi calmly pulled on his cigar before answering. “A band of conspirators is trying to provoke an uprising and remove His Majesty Shah Reza Pahlavi from the throne. Your lieutenant here was one of the traitors.” He glanced impassively at Ghaffani’s jackknifed body. The lieutenant’s pants were completely soaked with blood below the belt. The man was still alive, deep grooves of pain lining his face.

“He’s bleeding to death,” Gambiz said, hoarse with emotion.

“So he is.” Razdi smiled like a hunter who has just brought down his first deer of the season. “I shot him through the liver, to give him time to think about his betrayal before he dies.”

The adjutant’s gaze moved from the dying man to the revolver on the desk, weighing his options.

“And what side are you on, adjutant? Are you for the rightful authorities or for the infidels?”

The adjutant wavered no more. He saluted and clicked his heels. “The rightful authorities, Shazdeh. At your service.”

“Then, as of now, you’re in command. Listen carefully: Shah Reza has removed Premier Mosaddeq from office on charges of subversive activity. And Mosaddeq is now trying to seize power with the help of the communists. A pack of his rioters is heading this way. I want you to position one of the Fox scout cars above Darband Bridge. Immediately. If you choose your spot carefully, you will be able to pick off every armored vehicle coming up the road.”

“If you say so, Shazdeh.” Gambiz hesitated. “But what if the army sides with Mosaddeq?”

“So? What if they do?” Razdi glared at the adjutant.

Gambiz sighed. "I understand, Shazdeh. No one crosses Darband Bridge without your permission."

Razdi stuck the Colt in his coat pocket. "Excellent. The Shah rewards loyalty and courage. Keep that in mind!" He indicated the body on the floor with a jerk of his head. "And take this traitor with you. He's smelling up the library."

The adjutant saluted again and turned on his heels. He pulled his commander up by one arm and slung him unceremoniously across one shoulder. Ghaffani's arms and legs gave a couple of cramped jerks, then his lifeless head rolled to one side.

