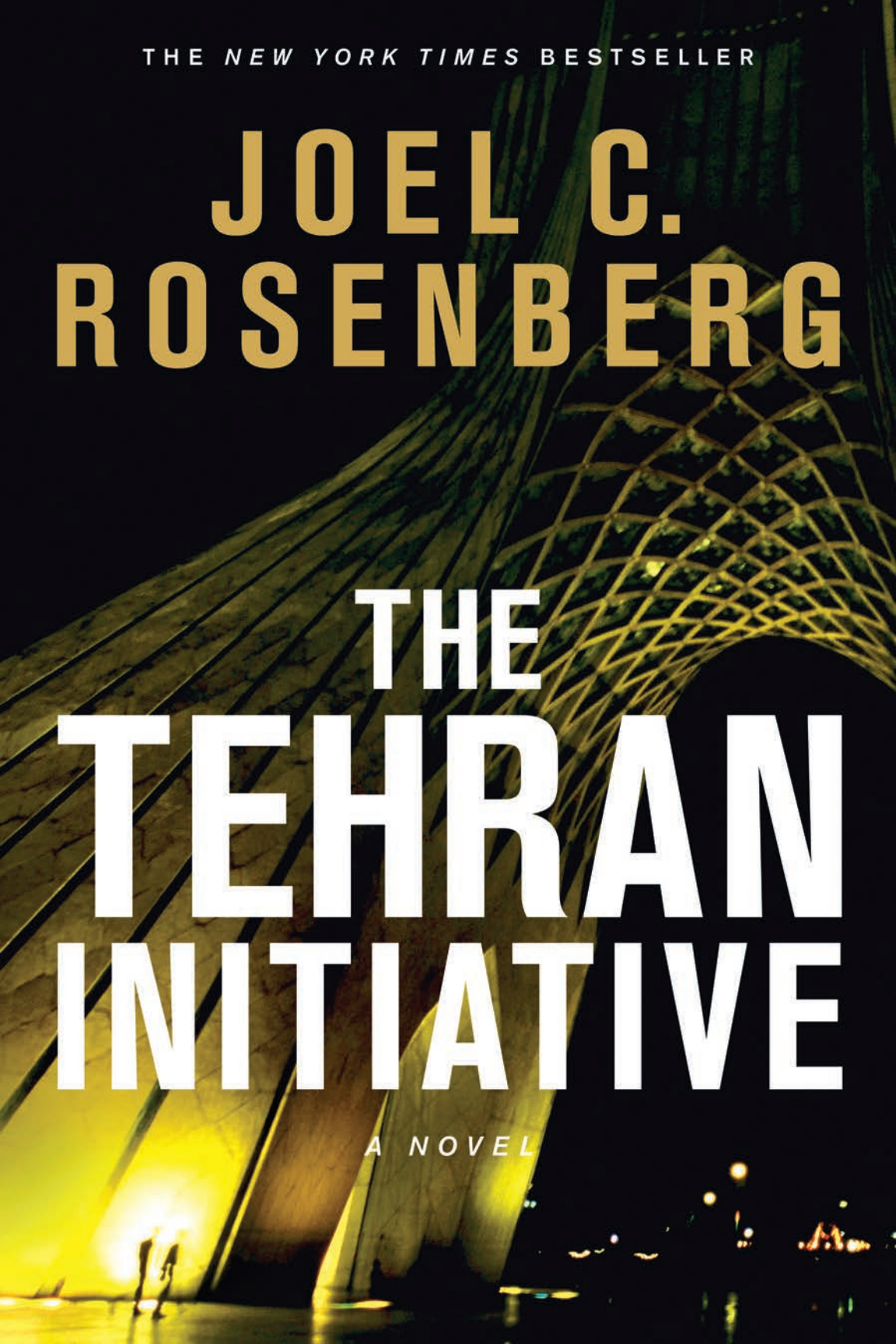


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JOEL C.
ROSENBERG

THE
TEHRAN
INITIATIVE

A NOVEL



THE TEHRAN INITIATIVE





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The Tehran Initiative

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*To all our friends in Iran and the Middle East,
yearning to be free.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Tehran, Iran, is one and a half hours ahead of Jerusalem and
eight and a half hours ahead of New York and Washington, DC.*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

AMERICANS

David Shirazi (aka Reza Tabrizi)—field officer, Central Intelligence Agency

Marseille Harper—childhood friend of David Shirazi; daughter of CIA operative Charlie Harper

Jack Zalinsky—senior operative, Central Intelligence Agency

Eva Fischer—field officer, Central Intelligence Agency

Roger Allen—director, Central Intelligence Agency

Tom Murray—deputy director for operations, Central Intelligence Agency

Dr. Mohammad Shirazi—cardiologist, father of David Shirazi

Nasreen Shirazi—mother of David Shirazi

William Jackson—president of the United States

Mike Bruner—Secret Service agent, assigned to President Jackson

IRANIANS

- Dr. Alireza Birjandi—preeminent scholar of Shia Islamic eschatology
Najjar Malik—former physicist, Atomic Energy Organization of Iran
Javad Nouri—senior governmental aide
Ayatollah Hamid Hosseini—Supreme Leader
Ahmed Darazi—president of Iran
Jalal Zandi—nuclear physicist
Firouz Nouri—leader of an Iranian terrorist cell
Rahim Yazidi—member of Firouz Nouri’s cell
Navid Yazidi—member of Firouz Nouri’s cell
Ali Faridzadeh—minister of defense
Mohsen Jazini—commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
Dr. Mohammed Saddaji—nuclear physicist (deceased)

ISRAELIS

- Asher Naphtali—prime minister of Israel
Levi Shimon—defense minister
Captain Avi Yaron—commander, Israeli Air Force squadron
Captain Yossi Yaron—commander, Israeli Air Force squadron

OTHERS

- Muhammad Ibn Hasan Ibn Ali—the Twelfth Imam
Tariq Khan—Pakistani nuclear physicist, working in Iran
Iskander Farooq—president of Pakistan
Abdel Mohammad Ramzy—president of Egypt

PREFACE

FROM *THE TWELFTH IMAM*

TEHRAN, IRAN
TUESDAY, MARCH 1

David Shirazi wondered if they'd even make it to the safe house in Karaj.

As he inched forward in Tehran's stop-and-go traffic toward Azadi Square, he saw the flashing lights of police cars ahead. Despite the roar of jumbo jets and cargo planes landing at Mehrabad International Airport, he could hear sirens approaching. Beside him sat Dr. Najjar Malik, the highest-ranking nuclear scientist in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the most valuable defector to the Central Intelligence Agency in a generation.

"They're setting up a roadblock," David said.

Najjar stiffened. "Then we need to get off this road."

David agreed. The problem was that every side street from here to the square was clogged with hundreds of other drivers trying to find their way around the logjam as well.

"We're going to have to get rid of this car."

"Why? What for?"

"The moment a police officer runs these license plates, he's going to come up with your name. We don't want to be in the car when that happens."

Without warning, David pulled the steering wheel hard to the right. He darted across two lanes of traffic, triggering a wave of angry honks.

Under no circumstances could he allow himself to get caught or implicated in the extraction of Najjar from the country. To do either

would blow his cover and compromise all the work he'd done. The Twelfth Imam's inner circle would never use the new satellite phones he'd just provided them. The MDS technical teams would be thrown out of the country. The CIA's multimillion-dollar effort to penetrate the Iranian regime would be ruined. And given that Iran now had the Bomb, the CIA needed every advantage it could possibly get.

David heard a siren behind them. He cursed as he glanced in his rearview mirror and saw flashing lights about ten cars back. He guessed that a police cruiser had spotted his rapid and reckless exit from Azadi Road and gotten suspicious. Najjar, cooler than David would have expected under the circumstances, bowed his head and began to pray. David admired his courage. The worse things got, the calmer the man became.

The siren and flashing lights were getting closer. David turned the wheel, jumped the curb, pulled Najjar's car off the congested street and onto the sidewalk, and hit the accelerator. Pedestrians started screaming and diving out of the way as David plowed through trash cans. The police cruiser was left in the dust, and David let himself smile.

The escape, however, was momentary. By the time they reached Qalani Street and took a hard left, another police cruiser was waiting. David wove in and out of traffic, but despite blowing through one light after another, he was steadily losing ground. Najjar was not praying anymore. He was craning his neck to see what was happening behind them and urging David to go faster. The road ahead was coming to an end. David suggested Najjar grab the door handle and brace for impact.

"Why?" Najjar asked at the last moment. "What are you going to do?"

David never answered. Instead, he slammed on the brakes and turned the steering wheel hard to the right, sending the car screeching and spinning across four lanes of traffic.

They were hit twice. The first was by the police cruiser itself. The second was by a southbound delivery truck that never saw them coming. The air bags inside Najjar's car exploded upon impact, saving their lives but filling the vehicle with smoke and fumes. But theirs was not the only collision. In less than six seconds, David had triggered a

seventeen-car pileup on Azizi Boulevard, shutting down traffic in all directions.

David quickly unfastened his seat belt. "You okay?" he asked.

"Are we still alive?"

"We are," David said, checking his new friend for serious injuries. "We made it."

"Are you insane?"

"We needed a diversion."

David couldn't get out his own door. It had been too badly mangled. So he climbed into the backseat, which was littered with shards of broken glass, and kicked out the back passenger-side door. He jumped out of the car and surveyed the scene. It was a terrible mess in both directions.

The police car was a smoldering pile of wreckage. Gasoline was leaking everywhere. David feared a single spark could blow the whole thing sky high. Inside, the solitary officer was unconscious.

Using all of his strength, David pried the driver's-side door open and checked the man's pulse. Fortunately, he was still alive, but he had an ugly gash on his forehead, and his face was covered in blood. David pocketed the officer's .38-caliber service revolver and portable radio. Then he pulled the officer far from the wreckage and laid him down on the sidewalk.

David hobbled back to Najjar's car, realizing his right knee had gotten banged up worse than he'd first realized. He looked down and noticed his pants were ripped and that blood was oozing from his leg.

"You ready to move?" David asked, coming over to the passenger side.

"I think so," Najjar said, his arms filled with the laptop and accessories.

"Good. Follow me."

They walked north about a hundred meters. Then David turned, pulled out the .38, aimed at the gas tank of Najjar's crumpled Fiat, and pulled the trigger. The car erupted in a massive ball of fire that not only obliterated the vehicle but all traces of their fingerprints and DNA as well.

“What was that for?” a stunned Najjar asked, shielding his eyes from the intense heat of the flames.

David smiled. “Insurance.”



David walked north down the center of Azizi Boulevard.

He limped his way past wrecked cars and distraught motorists fixated on the fire and smoke, with Najjar close behind. He clipped the police radio to his belt and put in the earphone. Just then, his phone vibrated. It was a text message from his CIA colleague, Eva Fischer, telling him to call their boss, Jack Zalinsky, in the secure mode. He did so right away, but it was Eva who actually picked up.

“Have you gone insane? The entire Global Operations Center is watching you via a Keyhole satellite. What are you doing?”

The chatter on the police radio suddenly intensified. “I can’t really talk now,” David said. “Do you need something?”

“I found you a plane,” she said. “It’ll be in Karaj tonight.”

Suddenly shots rang out, shattering a windshield beside them. Instinctively David hit the ground and pulled Najjar down with him between a Peugeot and a Chevy, dropping his phone as he did. People started screaming and running for cover. He could hear Eva yelling, “*What is that? What’s going on?*” but he had no time to respond. He grabbed the phone and jammed it into his pocket. Ordering Najjar to stay on the ground, he pulled the revolver and tried to get an angle on whoever was shooting at them.

Two more shots rang out, blowing out the windshield of the Peugeot. David again flattened himself to the ground and covered his head to protect himself from the flying glass. He could see under the cars that someone was moving toward him. He got up and took a peek. Another shot whizzed by him and ripped into the door of the Chevy.

Dead ahead, maybe ten yards away, was a garbage truck. David made sure Najjar was okay, then made a break for the back end of the truck. His movement drew more fire. But it also gave him a chance to see who

was doing the shooting. The blue jacket and cap were the giveaway. This was a Tehran city police officer.

Then the officer's voice crackled over the radio.

"Base, this is Unit 116. I'm at the crash site. One officer is down with multiple injuries. Witnesses say they saw someone steal the officer's service revolver. I'm currently pursuing two suspects on foot. Shots fired. Requesting immediate backup."

"Unit 116, this is Base—roger that. Backup en route. Stand by."

This was not good. David crept along the side of the garbage truck, hoping to outflank the officer from the right, then stopped suddenly when he heard the sounds of crunching glass just a few yards ahead.

David tried to steady his breathing and carefully choose his next move as the footsteps got closer and closer. He could hear more sirens rapidly approaching. He was out of time. He took three steps and pivoted around the front of the truck, aimed the .38, and prepared to pull the trigger. But it was not the officer. It was a little girl, no more than six, shivering and scared.

How did she get here? Where is her mother?

Three more shots rang out. David dropped to the ground and covered the girl with his body. He took off his jacket and wrapped her in it, then got back in a crouch and tried to reacquire the officer in his sights.

But now there were two.

David had a clean shot at one of them, but he didn't dare fire from right over the child. He broke right, hobbling for a blue sedan just ahead. Once again, gunfire erupted all around him. David barely got himself safely behind the sedan. He gritted his teeth and caught his breath, then popped his head up again to assess the situation. One of the officers was running straight toward David, while the other started running toward Najjar. David didn't hesitate. He raised the revolver and squeezed off two rounds. The man collapsed to the ground no more than six yards from David's position.

David had no time to lose. Adrenaline coursing through his system, he made his way to the first officer, grabbed the revolver from his hand, and sprinted toward the second officer. Racing through the maze of cars, he approached the garbage truck, stopped quickly, and glanced

around the side. The second officer was waiting for him and fired. David pulled back, waited a beat, then looked again and fired.

The man fired three more times. David dove behind the Chevy, then flattened himself against the ground and fired under the car at the officer's feet. One of the shots was a direct hit. The man fell to the ground, groaning in pain. David heard him radioing for help and giving his superiors David's physical description. Then, before David realized what was happening, the officer crawled around the front of the Chevy, took aim at David's head, and fired again. David instinctively leaned right but the shot grazed his left arm. He righted himself, took aim, and squeezed off two more rounds at the officer's chest, killing the man instantly.

David's mobile phone rang, but he ignored it. They had to get out of there. They couldn't let themselves be caught. But Najjar was nowhere to be found.

Again his phone rang, but still he ignored it. Frantic, David searched for Najjar in, behind, and around car after car. This time, his phone vibrated. Furious, he checked the text message only to find this message from Eva: 3rd bldg on rt.

David suddenly got it. He glanced up in the sky, thankful for Eva and her team watching his back from two hundred miles up. He made his way up the street to the third apartment building on the right. His gun drawn, he slowly edged his way toward the entrance.

David risked a quick peek into the lobby.

Najjar was there, but he was not alone. On the marble floor next to him were the laptop and accessories. And in Najjar's arms was the six-year-old girl from the street. He was trying to keep her warm and telling her everything would be all right.

David began to breathe again. "Didn't I tell you not to move?"

"I didn't want her to get hit," Najjar said.

David wiped blood from his mouth. "We need to go."



At the safe house, David dressed Najjar's wounds.

Najjar ate a little and fell fast asleep. David unlocked a vault stacked

with communications gear and uploaded everything on Dr. Saddaji's laptop, external hard drive, and DVD-ROMs to Langley, with encrypted copies cc'd to Zalinsky and Fischer. Then he typed up his report of all that had happened so far and e-mailed the encrypted file to Zalinsky and Fischer as well.

At six the next morning, word came that the plane had arrived. David woke Najjar, loaded the computer equipment into a duffel bag, and took the bag and the scientist to the garage downstairs. Ten minutes later, they arrived at the edge of the private airfield.

David pointed to the Falcon 200 business jet on the tarmac. "There's your ride," he said.

"What about you?" Najjar asked. "You're coming too, aren't you?"

"No."

"But if they find out you were connected to me, they will kill you."

"That is why I have to stay."

Najjar shook David's hand and held it for a moment, then got out of the car, duffel bag in hand, and ran for the plane. David watched him go. He wished he could stay and watch the plane take off as the sun rose brilliantly in the east. But he couldn't afford the risk. He had to dispose of the Renault he was now driving, steal another car, and get back to Tehran.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

SUNDAY
MARCH 6

(IRAN TIME)



1

ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

“I have come to reestablish the Caliphate.”

At any other time in history, such an utterance could have come only from the lips of a madman. But Muhammad Ibn Hasan Ibn Ali said it so matter-of-factly, and with such authority, that Iskander Farooq was tempted not to challenge the notion.

“I have come to bring peace and justice and to rule the earth with a rod of iron,” he continued. “This is why Allah sent me. He will reward those who submit. He will punish those who resist. But make no mistake, Iskander; in the end, every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess that I am the Lord of the Age.”

The satellite reception was crystal clear. The voice of the Promised One—the Twelfth Imam, or Mahdi—was calm, his statements airtight, Iskander Farooq thought as he pressed the phone to his ear and paced back and forth along the veranda of his palace overlooking northeastern Islamabad. He knew what the Mahdi wanted, but every molecule in his body warned him not to accede to his demands. They were not presented as demands, of course, but that’s precisely what they were—and while the Mahdi made it all sound wise and reasonable, Farooq heard an edge of menace in the man’s tone, and this made him all the more wary.

The early morning air was bitterly and unusually cold. The sun had not yet risen over the pine trees and paper mulberries of the Margalla Hills, yet Farooq could already hear the chants of the masses less than a block away. “*Give praise to Imam al-Mahdi!*” they shouted again and again. “*Give praise to Imam al-Mahdi!*”

A mere hundred tanks and a thousand soldiers and special police forces now protected the palace. Only they kept the crowds—estimated at over a quarter of a million Pakistanis—from storming the gates and seizing control. But how loyal were they? If the number of protesters doubled or tripled or worse by dawn, or by lunchtime, how much longer could he hold out? He had to make a decision quickly, Farooq knew, and yet the stakes could not be higher.

“What say you?” the Mahdi asked. “You owe me an answer.”

Iskander Farooq had no idea how to respond. As president of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the fifty-six-year-old former chemical engineer was horrified that Tehran had suddenly become the seat of a new Caliphate. Though the Mahdi had not formally declared the Iranian capital as the epicenter of the new Islamic kingdom, every Muslim around the world certainly suspected this announcement was coming soon. Farooq certainly did, and it infuriated him. Neither he, nor his father, nor his father’s father had ever trusted the Iranians. The Persian Empire had ruled his ancestors, stretching in its day from India in the east to Sudan and Ethiopia in the west. Now the Persians wanted to subjugate them all over again.

True, Iran’s shah had been the first world leader to formally recognize the independent state of Pakistan upon its declaration of independence in 1947. But it had been a brief window of friendliness. After Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had come to power in 1979, tensions between the two states had spiked. Khomeini had led an Islamic Revolution that was thoroughly Shia in all its complexions, and this had not sat well with the Pakistanis. Neither Farooq nor his closest advisors—nor anyone he had known growing up—had ever believed that the Twelfth Imam was coming to earth one day or that such a figure would actually be the Islamic messiah or that he would usher in the end of days, much less that Sunnis would end up joining a Caliphate led by him. Farooq’s teachers had all mocked and ridiculed such notions as the heresy of the Shias, and Farooq had rarely given the matter any thought.

Now what was he to believe? The Twelfth Imam was no longer some fable or myth, like Santa Claus for the pagans and Christians or the tooth fairy for children everywhere. Now the Mahdi—or someone

claiming to be the Mahdi—was here on the planet. Now this so-called Promised One was taking the Islamic world by storm, electrifying the masses and instigating insurrections wherever his voice was heard.

More to the point, this “Mahdi” was now on the other end of this satellite phone call, requesting—or more accurately, *insisting upon*—Farooq’s fealty and that of his nation.



SYRACUSE, NEW YORK

David Shirazi faced the most difficult decision of his life.

On the one hand, despite being only twenty-five years old, he was one of only a handful of NOCs—nonofficial cover agents—in the Central Intelligence Agency who had an Iranian heritage. He was fluent in Farsi and had proven he could operate effectively and discreetly inside the Islamic Republic. He had no doubt, therefore, that he was about to be ordered to go back inside Iran within the next forty-eight to seventy-two hours, given how rapidly things were developing.

On the other hand, David simply wasn’t convinced that the American administration was serious about stopping Iran from building an arsenal of nuclear weapons or stopping the Twelfth Imam from using them. In his view, President William Jackson was a foreign policy novice.

Yes, Jackson had lived in the Muslim world. Yes, he’d studied and traveled extensively in the Muslim world. Yes, Jackson believed he was an expert on Islam, but David could see the man was in way over his head. Despite years of hard evidence to the contrary, Jackson still believed he could negotiate with Tehran, just as the US had done with the nuclear-armed Soviet Empire for decades. He still believed economic sanctions could prove effective. He still believed the US could contain or deter a nuclear Iran. But the president was dead wrong.

The truth was chilling. David knew that Iran was being run by an apocalyptic, genocidal death cult. They believed the end of the world was at hand. They believed their Islamic messiah had come. They believed that Israel was the Little Satan, that the US was the Great Satan, and that both needed to be annihilated in order for the Twelfth

Imam to build his Caliphate. David had done the research. He'd met with and extensively interviewed the most respected Iranian scholar on Shia Islamic eschatology. He'd read the most important books on the topic written by Shia mullahs. He had found Iran's top nuclear scientist and smuggled him and his family out of the country. He had documented everything he had seen and heard and learned in detailed memos to his superiors at Langley. He had argued that they were severely underestimating the influence Shia End Times theology was having on the regime.

He knew at least some of his work had made it to the Oval Office. Why else was he being asked to come to Washington for a meeting with President Jackson at noon tomorrow? But he wasn't convinced he was getting through. Why should he risk his life and go back inside Iran if his superiors didn't understand the gravity of the situation and weren't willing to take decisive measures to neutralize the Iranian threat before it was too late?



ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

"I appreciate your very gracious invitation," Farooq replied.

Trying not to appear to be stalling for time, though that was precisely what he was doing, he added, "I look forward to discussing the matter with my Cabinet later today and then with the full parliament later this week."

Events were moving far too quickly for his liking. Someone had to drag his feet and slow things down. To Farooq's shock, he had watched as his dear friend Abdullah Mohammad Jeddawi, king of Saudi Arabia, had actually fallen prostrate before the Twelfth Imam on worldwide television, then publicly announced that the Saudi kingdom was joining the new Caliphate. Worse, Jeddawi had even offered the cities of Mecca or Medina to be the seat of power for the new Islamic kingdom should the Mahdi deem either of them acceptable. How was that possible? Despite his divinely appointed role as commander of the faithful and custodian of the holy sites, Jeddawi—a devout Sunni Muslim—had

offered no resistance to the Shia Mahdi, no hesitation, no push back whatsoever. Farooq could not imagine a more disgraceful moment, but the damage was done, and in the hours since, the dominoes had continued falling one by one.

The prime minister of Yemen, a good and decent man whom Farooq had known since childhood, had called the Mahdi late last night to say his country would join the Caliphate, according to a report on Al Jazeera. Now the Gulf-based satellite news service was reporting that Qatar was also joining, a dramatic change from just twenty-four hours earlier. So were Somalia and Sudan. Algeria was in. The new government of Tunisia said they were “actively considering” the Mahdi’s invitation to join the Caliphate. So was the king of Morocco. The Shia-dominated, Hezbollah-controlled government of Lebanon had made no formal announcement but was meeting in emergency session at that very moment. Turkey’s parliament and prime minister were reportedly gathering the next day to discuss the Mahdi’s invitation.

To their credit, the Egyptians under President Abdel Ramzy were resisting. So were the Iraqis and the Sunni king of Bahrain. These were good signs, but Farooq wasn’t convinced they would be good enough. Syrian president Gamal Mustafa in Damascus was silent thus far, but Farooq had little doubt he, too, would soon cave.

“Is there a reason for this hesitation I perceive in you?” the Mahdi asked.

Farooq paused and considered his words carefully. “Perhaps only that this has all come so suddenly, and I do not know you, have not heard your heart, have not discussed your vision for our region or what role you envision Pakistan playing.”

“History is a river, my son, and the current is moving rapidly.”

“All the more reason that we should take caution,” Farooq replied, “lest we be swept away by events beyond our control.”

“Do you have a request of me?” the Mahdi asked. “If so, make it now.”

Farooq struggled to find the right words. He had no desire to meet this pretender to the throne. He had more important things to do than to waste his precious time with a man so clearly consumed with blind

arrogance and ambition. But Farooq knew full well that he was now walking through a minefield and that he had to be judicious with every step.

He looked out across the city and marveled at the majestic parliament building to his right and the ornate Islamic architecture of the supreme court facility to his left. Both served as tangible reminders of the great civilization over which he now presided. He dared not gamble with his nation's sovereignty, much less his people's dignity and honor. He felt a tremendous burden upon his shoulders. He governed more than 185 million Muslims. Precious few of them were Shias, like the Mahdi who had awoken him from his slumber at this ungodly hour. The vast majority of them were Sunnis, like him. Most were devout. Some were passionate. Some were fanatics. A week ago, Farooq would never have imagined that any of them would embrace the teachings about the Mahdi, much less take to the streets to call for Pakistan to join the Caliphate with the Twelfth Imam as its leader. But now the people were on the move.

From Karachi to Cairo to Casablanca, millions of Muslims—Shias and Sunnis alike—were on the streets demanding change, demanding the immediate downfall of “apostate regimes” like his own, demanding that the *ummah*, the community of Muslims around the world, join forces to create a new, unified, borderless kingdom, a new Caliphate stretching from Pakistan to Morocco.

And that was just the beginning. The masses wanted what the Twelfth Imam was preaching: a global Caliphate in which every man, woman, and child on the face of the planet converted to Islam or perished in a day of judgment.

It was lunacy, Farooq thought. Sheer lunacy. Yet he dared not say so. Not yet. Not now. To do so, he knew, would be political suicide. Abdel Ramzy could publicly defy the Mahdi from his secure perch on the banks of the Nile, backed by all that American money and weaponry. But one word in public from the Mahdi that he was unhappy with the “infidel of Islamabad,” and Farooq knew he would have a full-blown and bloody revolution on his hands. The protesting masses—notably peaceful in their first twenty-four hours—could very well turn violent.

He had seen it before. He had been part of such mobs before, back in his youth. If that happened, he genuinely doubted the military would stand with him, and then what?

“I appreciate your call very much, Your Excellency,” Farooq told the Mahdi. “There are a few more questions I have, ones that I would prefer not to discuss over the phone. Perhaps we could meet in person? Would that be acceptable to you?”

“It must be soon. Coordinate details with Javad.”

“Very well, Your Excellency,” Farooq said before being put on hold.

As he waited for Javad Nouri, the Mahdi’s personal aide, to come on the line, Farooq tried not to think about the consequences if he were deposed and his nation descended into anarchy. If he didn’t bide his time and plan his steps very carefully, this self-appointed Twelfth Imam would soon gain control of his beloved Pakistan, and with it, control of 172 nuclear warheads—the nation’s entire arsenal—and the ballistic missiles to deliver them.