

# ALLAH'S REVENGE



PETE BARBER



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## Dedication

Thank you, Joyce, for always believing.

## Acknowledgments

Cherrie, Lucy (and her dad), Scott, and Saphron, thanks for grinding through the early versions and helping me chisel off some raw edges. Thanks, Nicola, for providing the polish to make it shine.

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And finally, to the many writers at Scribophile, who daily help me hone my craft and keep me humble—may your Karma always be positive.

# PART I



## The First Event

“Damn! That was fast,” he said.



In his makeshift laboratory in a bombed-out Israeli medical facility, Dawud dipped his hand into a small glass vivarium and selected a white rat with an orange stripe spray-painted on its back. He held the wriggling rodent by the tail, swung it away from the cage, and squirted two puffs from an asthma inhaler into its face. When he was satisfied that the mist had dissipated, he returned the rat to the vivarium, setting it next to its brother. The rats touched noses and sniffed each other before recommencing their search for escape.

“Was that enough?” Firman asked. He spoke English with a slight French accent.

Dawud looked up at the tall, dark assassin—an infidel, yes, but also a useful tool for Allah. “Even a trace of inhibitor in the airway is sufficient to provide immunity from the weapon.” Dawud took a puff from the inhaler and passed it to Firman, who sucked in a dose before moving to the end of the table, next to the rats.

Dawud sealed a lid on the vivarium and opened the valve on a straw-sized plastic tube connected to a compressed-air

cylinder. A hiss signaled the release of the nanoweapon into the rats' habitat.

The untreated rat shuddered as if shot through with an electric current. Then it charged and slammed and bounced off the glass walls, legs pumping in a futile attempt to flee. Black-bead eyes sprung wide. Lips snarled back, baring pink gums and white teeth. The rodent flipped on its side, jerked and spasmed for five seconds, and then became still.

The orange-marked rat edged forward and inspected a hard black column of charcoal that had emerged from the dead rat's throat, distending its jaws and protruding one inch beyond its snout.

Firman's eyes stretched wide and a slow smile spread across his thin lips. "Damn! That was fast," he said.



Two weeks later, sixteen-hundred strangers barreled through cold, dark tunnels beneath London's nightly bustle. Brought together by chance and circumstances, homeward-bound workers, uneasy tourists, uniformed schoolchildren, and sated shoppers rocked and bobbed with the motion of the train like marionettes.

The tube train was well named: eight metal cylinders, each sixty feet long and eight feet wide, linked together like a chain.

Firman stood at the center of the fifth car, holding a chrome rail. He peered between crammed bodies at the fortunate few with seats, lost in their books, PDAs and tablet computers. His hands were damp with sweat inside thin, transparent latex gloves.

Firman pulled an inhaler from his inside pocket. Three times he sprayed, held, and then exhaled through his nose,

coating his airways with immunity. His reserved English neighbors averted their eyes.

He lifted a black shoulder bag above his head and depressed a button embedded in the base. A high-pitched hiss signaled the release of compressed death from the canister within. Lethal molecules streamed into the car. Their unique, seeking nature found fuel in abundance: tongue and throat and lung.

It was a feeding frenzy.

Firman watched, fascinated and still, as passengers, eyes stretched wide with terror, tore at throats and mouths. They gasped and flailed like landed fish before flopping to the ground, mouths gaped wide and crammed full of black charcoal.

In seconds, corpses surrounded him. A tragic barrier of unwitting protectors in case the car contained a hero.

It didn't.

Firman, cheeks flushed with excitement, pulled a video camera from his pocket and held it high, panning the scene.

When Firman's car burst into the stark light of Oxford Circus, central London's busiest train station, he stayed below the window line, face hidden in the shadow of a gray sweatshirt hood. Back pressed hard against the sliding doors, he knelt on a young woman's chest. The thin beat from her iPod was audible in the deathly silent carriage. Firman pulled an envelope from his side pocket, exposed an adhesive strip, and pressed the sticky message over the acne spots on her forehead, covering her stone-dead eyes.

At 5:09 p.m., rush-hour passengers stood six deep on the Central Line platform. They blinked away the rush of warm, stale air pushed from the tunnel by the slowing train. Their eyes hunted for signs of space, and the death-car's windows

showed empty. Hopefuls at the rear shuffled forward, sensing the possibility of an early escape.

The train stopped, doors hissed open, and Firman sprang backward, merging with the pressing crowd as it surged into the seemingly empty carriage.

A silent beat of awareness preceded screaming chaos when the potential riders nearest the train pushed and fought against the press of the crowd behind them, desperate to escape the macabre scene of bodies strewn like discarded laundry, frozen eyes crazed with terror and gaping mouths crammed with charcoal.

“They’re all dead.”

“Oh, my God!”

“What’s happening?”

“Out of my way!”

Firman blended with the crowd, crouching low to avoid the station’s closed-circuit TV cameras, digital witnesses to his work, the worst train disaster in London’s storied history, the most callous terrorist act since that terrible September day in New York.

The crowd surged along the platform toward the exit stairs. In front of him, an elderly woman lost her footing. The frantic mob parted and washed around her prone body like a stream skirting a rock. Firman kicked her purse along the ground so when she tried to stand, her wrist became trapped in the strap and the crowd trampled over her.

His section of the crowd squeezed up the final twenty steps and spilled onto the broad pavement. He sucked in a deep breath. The street was jammed with vehicles. Low-hanging exhaust fumes stung his nose.

He peeled off the gloves, slipped them in the pocket of his hoodie, and walked three blocks.

He stepped into a souvenir shop, slid hangers along their circular rail and selected an extra-large “Mind the Gap” T-shirt. He snapped off the price tag, removed his hoodie, and pulled on the shirt. The clerk watched him on a TV monitor.

Firman gave him a bill. “I’ll wear it if you don’t mind.”

The shopkeeper wore a white turban. He smiled. “You American?”

“Canadian.”

He nodded his acceptance of Firman’s lie and handed over the change.

“Could I have a bag to put my old clothes in?”

“Ten pence, please.”

Firman grinned at the ludicrous request and passed over the coin. He stuffed his shoulder bag and hoodie in the plastic carrier.

“Have a nice day,” he said as he left.

He walked two blocks, turned down an alley, and tossed the bag into a stinking Dumpster.

At 5:30 p.m., he crossed the road to a corner pub packed with white-collar workers. Instead of the welcoming harmonics of an after-office crowd, a church-like quiet prevailed. The congregation stared openmouthed at a wall-mounted flat-screen, which showed a repeating loop of the train as it entered the station and its doors slid back to reveal a carriage full of corpses. They had all traveled on underground rail. There, but for the grace of God . . .

Firman laid a hand on the bar. “Pint of lager, please.”

The bartender dragged his eyes from the TV. He poured and pushed the glass across the counter. “Fuckin’ Arabs.”

Firman nodded, paid, and settled in at the end of the bar, an incognito star reveling in the impact of his triumphant opening-night performance.

# PART II



Allah's Warrior

“Professor, this is indeed a breakthrough. What was the catalyst?”

“Not what, Mr. Eudon. Who!”  
The professor’s flippancy irritated Nazar, but he waited.

“The *who* is Dawud Ferran.”



Two years earlier.

Nazar Eudon was an oil man. Finding oil, processing oil, and selling oil had made him rich. But nowadays “oil man” wasn’t politically correct; so, on the advice of his marketing VP, Nazar had made a token investment in green energy, or the closest to it he could stomach—ethanol production. Nazar’s head of research had invited him to a demonstration at Eudon Ethanol’s Ohio research facility in Akron. Nazar had allocated four hours for his visit. He begrudged every second.

Professor Philip Farjohn’s eyes were bright and his face flushed with excitement as he illustrated his points with expansive sweeps of his arms. “We have d . . . d . . . developed some remarkable technology since your l . . . l . . . last visit, Mr. Eudon.”

While the professor talked technology, Nazar peered through a letter-box-sized window into a thirty-foot-diameter

metal fermentation tank. A transparent box about the size and shape of a telephone booth was positioned at the center of the tank, twenty feet below him. A stepladder stood ready beside it.

A clear liquid filled a foot or so of the bottom of the box, which overflowed with garbage: old tires, newspapers, flattened cardboard, plastic soda bottles, and a pizza box (complete with pizza remnants) were visible. Nazar wondered whether the professor had brought the trash from home. The man was quite eccentric enough to consider it.

After five minutes of the professor's stammer-filled explanation, Nazar held up his hand to signal a stop. It took a few seconds for the tall, angular man to slow his words and calm his arms. Finally, like a clockwork toy running out of spring tension, he came to rest.

Nazar said, "Professor, I believe it will be more efficient if I tell you what I have understood from your briefing and then allow you to correct any omissions."

"Yes, b . . . b . . . but . . ."

"Professor."

"Sorry, it's ju . . . just . . ."

Nazar's hand edged forward until it touched the professor's large, bony nose. The man jerked back and fell silent.

Nazar pointed to the window. "I'm looking into a fermentation vessel. Normally, it would be loaded with wood chips and flooded with water. Specialized fungi developed at your lab would be introduced to the mixture, and over a period of weeks they would break down the chips. The resultant mash would be heated to release the sugars from the feedstock."

"Yes, the p . . . p . . . process takes a huge amount of energy, but—"

Nazar cleared his throat and continued. "Yeasts added to the cooled mash feed on the sugars and convert them to alcohol, which is distilled to extract ethanol."

"As you say, but now—"

"Your team has developed, or, if I understand correctly, they have used nanotechnology to *build* artificial microbes, atomic-scale machines which you call nanobots. You believe this development constitutes a breakthrough."

"They are 1 . . . 1 . . . less than one nanometer, one billionth of a meter, Mr. Eudon, but amazing, quite amazing." The professor smiled a smug, self-congratulatory grin.

Nazar continued. "You claim these nanobots are intelligent enough to analyze and then break down a wide variety of feedstock. They can disassemble the feedstock at an atomic level and reassemble the atoms into the molecular structure of ethanol, eliminating the lengthy fungal decomposition and expensive heating phases."

The professor nodded along with Nazar's description, and, when his boss finished speaking, he jumped in. "The nanobots bring an additional benefit. Yeast's efficiency reduces as alcohol levels increase. When alcohol concentrations approach seventeen p . . . p . . . percent, the yeast dies, leaving valuable sugars unconverted. With nanobots, we can continue the conversion and harvest the maximum p . . . potential from the f . . . feedstock. Yields are much higher."

"How high?"

"Thirty percent by volume."

Nazar nodded. Finally, he'd heard something interesting. He pointed to the trash in the center of the chamber.

"Professor, it looks like you cleared out your garage."

The professor blushed sufficiently to confirm Nazar's suspicion.

“Initially,” the professor said, “we d . . . developed the nanobots to work with wood chips. The breakthrough came when we built the analytical layer into them. Theoretically, they can p . . . process any biomass—anything that grew with s . . . s . . . sunlight.”

“What’s the liquid at the bottom of the box?”

“Water. The bots need a supply of hydrogen; they’ll extract it from the H<sub>2</sub>O.” He leaned down with a conspiratorial grin. “Shall we l . . . let them loose, Mr. Eudon?”

Nazar turned to the viewing window.

The professor picked up a wall phone and spoke. A short, bearded man wearing a white lab coat and silver gloves walked through a door in the side of the fermentation tank below and climbed the stepladder until he was level with the top of the junk pile. He unscrewed the cap from a container the size of a soup can and poured a liquid over one of the old tires. Then he pulled off the gloves and dropped them and the empty container into the box.

“Is it safe? I mean, couldn’t these nanobots disassemble him?”

“The nanobots operate according to programmed start and stop parameters. These bots will only become active with the application of sunlight, and they’re programmed to terminate after eleven minutes.”

The lab technician closed the door, sealing the chamber. Nazar heard a whirring sound. He looked up. Sixty feet above, silvered blinds slid back from the domed glass roof of the fermentation vessel. Sunlight flooded in, concentrated by the dome, and shone like a spotlight on the garbage pile.

“1:43 p.m.” The professor read off a wall clock.

“How much material can they break down in eleven minutes?” Nazar asked.

“Well, I’ve n . . . never actually used such varied feed-stock.”

Nazar spun and glared at the professor. “You mean you’ve never tried this before?”

“Not with this particular m . . . mixture. I thought we should try something special in honor of your visit. This s . . . seemed more . . . um . . . theatrical.”

“Hmph.” Nazar turned away. He did not like being used as a guinea pig.

Movement in the chamber caught his attention. Lower-level items moved and caused the trash to bump and settle.

“The tire moved.” Nazar said.

“Yes.” The professor laughed, an unpleasant, piercing sound, which made Nazar wince. “Yes, it did. L . . . L . . . Look at the pizza.”

Nazar watched the pizza slip out of sight as the garbage slid lower, like snow melting in a heated saucepan. The water at the bottom of the vessel had turned bright orange.

“Won’t they eat through the box?” Nazar asked.

“Carbon-free glass,” the professor replied.

As the last of the junk submerged, Nazar noted the time: 1:48 p.m.—five minutes.

The liquid bubbled and belched and rose higher in the containment vessel. Gradually, the bright-orange coloration faded, and the agitation slowed. Eleven minutes after the process started, the liquid was still and clear. Nazar estimated the box to be about half full.

“I see solids at the bottom,” Nazar said.

“Carbon-free items: some types of glass, aluminum cans, and so on.”

“I don’t understand how such a small container of bots can convert so much material in eleven minutes.”

“It’s called c . . . convergent assembly. The nanobots we placed on the pile used energy from sunlight to assemble molecular machines. Each of those machines made more machines and so on. In the nanoworld, things are p . . . processed at nanospeed. A single assembler can perform over one million processes in a second. One makes a million, and each of those makes another million. Within s . . . sixty seconds, the initial stock created a huge army of nanobots.”

“But how can there be so much liquid?”

“The bots disassemble the feedstock. The atomic t . . . transformation releases energy. The bots use that energy to reassemble the atoms into the target product, in our case, a solution c . . . c . . . containing ethanol. Obviously they aren’t creating m . . . matter—that’s impossible—they are simply rearranging atoms of biomass and transforming them into the atomic sequence we program them for. Rather like tearing down a Lego house and rearranging the blocks to make Lego cars.”

“What’s in the box now?”

“Based on my view of the vessel, about two hundred gallons of l . . . liquid from which we can distill about sixty gallons of ethanol.”

Nazar’s eyebrows lifted and his mouth opened, but when no sound came out it triggered another bout of piercing laughter from the professor. This time, Nazar laughed with him. He reached out and shook the professor’s hand.

“Professor, this is indeed a breakthrough. What was the catalyst?”

“Not what, Mr. Eudon. Who?”

The professor’s flippancy irritated Nazar, but he waited.

“The *who* is Dawud Ferran, or D . . . David Baker, as he’s known in America. Yes, that is who. But why is David Baker

here? And the answer to the question is because of you, Mr. Eudon. He’s here because of your wise and farsighted investment in the s . . . skills of your fellow countrymen. His family is from Beirut, Lebanon.”

“He came out of my scholarship program?”

“David joined us two years ago after completing his Master’s. As you know, under the t . . . terms of the Nazar Eudon Scholarship for outstanding Arab students, we had first option on his employment. I interviewed the boy, well, m . . . man, I suppose, but he is so young. I was very impressed.

“We’d already developed p . . . primitive bots. We were using them as a catalyst to accelerate cellulosic breakdown—to make the fungi more efficient. But David examined the problem holistically and went for the ju . . . jugular.” The professor leaned close to Nazar’s ear and spoke in a reverent whisper. “Mr. Eudon, I believe David’s nanobots are quite the most exquisite objects I’ve ever encountered.”

“Professor Farjohn, I’d very much like to meet David.”

“Yes, of course.” He glanced at the wall clock. “Ah, it’s two o’clock. I’m afraid he won’t be available for an hour. Would you like to wait, or perhaps leave and return at three?”

“Why can’t I meet one of my employees? Is he not working today?”

“David is always working. To be candid, Mr. Eudon, he works constantly—reminds me of myself at his age. Although I confess I am s . . . somewhat in awe of the young man’s mind. I don’t believe I would have been a match for him, even in my prime.”

“Why can’t I meet him until then?”

“He’s at p . . . prayers, Mr. Eudon. Didn’t I explain? He prays each afternoon. We’ve set aside a small room with the

orientation of Mecca marked on the wall for the Muslims on campus. David is always present. He's very devout.

"I understand." Nazar was accustomed to the call to prayers being used in his Middle Eastern operations, often to escape unwelcome work. "I've work to catch up on, please find me a guest office and arrange for David to meet me once his religious obligations are satisfied."

Nazar spent the next hour running numbers. He didn't understand nanotechnology, but, if the chemical transformation was scalable, David's nanobots could be the holy grail of energy production. Ethanol was an ideal fuel: clean-burning, usable in vehicles or as a substitute for oil and coal in power plants. Producing ethanol from corn was politically expedient in the Corn Belt, but it used a lot of energy that came from dirty nonrenewable fossil fuels.

Nanobots, using sunlight and water to transform inexpensive, readily available feedstock, turned the cost model on its head. Nazar decided to increase his investment in Eudon Ethanol Inc. He would fund a prototype to test the commercial potential of David Baker's technology.

He'd based Eudon Ethanol Inc. in Akron because the sitting U.S. Senator was an influential member of the Subcommittee on Energy. After what he'd witnessed today, he would need to move the technology to a more remote location. He didn't want any publicity yet. He made a list of the key assets he would need to secure. Top of the list was David Baker. He had to lock down the brains behind the nanobots.

At three-thirty, Nazar thought he heard a knock at his door. He waited a few seconds and there it was again, a quiet tapping.

"Come in."

The door opened slowly. It seemed to Nazar that a child entered, but something about the posture convinced him it was indeed a man.

"Are you David?"

"I am."

Nazar switched to Arabic.

"Please, Dawud, come in and sit. I have been looking forward to meeting you."

The young man walked toward the desk with a self-conscious, shuffling gait; head down, shoulders hunched. Nazar guessed David's height at less than five feet. The boy's stooped posture probably cost him three inches. Unkempt black hair merged into a dark scruffy beard and moustache. He sat opposite Nazar and stared at the floor.

"Professor Farjohn demonstrated your nanobots to me this afternoon."

"I was there."

"Ah, you brought them in?"

"Yes."

"Well, young man, you have done remarkable work. I understand you have only been with us for two years?"

"Twenty-two months and six days."

"You're counting?"

"I count . . . everything."

The boy, for that's how Nazar saw him, continued to look down. His face remained impassive and sullen. Nazar tried a different approach.

"Dawud, where is your family from?"

"Banquet, Ohio."

"I mean originally."

"Beirut, Lebanon."

"Did you know my family is also from there?"

“Yes.”

“Dawud, I intend to enlarge the scope of the nanobot project. I need to know whether the ethanol conversion will scale up.”

“Yes.”

“The professor informs me that you haven’t taken a break since you started here. Is that correct?”

David finally looked up. His eyes were black slits peering from beneath thick dark eyebrows. “I am perfectly satisfied with my work and my working conditions, Mr. Eudon.”

“I’m pleased to hear it, but I need to ask more of you. I intend to move the laboratory away from Ohio. I would like to offer you a reward if you are prepared to relocate, perhaps a bonus?”

David remained passive; the monetary incentive seemed to make no impression.

“Or an extended vacation, a visit to your homeland to reacquaint with family and friends?”

David cocked his head slightly to the side. “I have a life-long ambition to take the Hajj.”

“That’s most commendable.” Nazar stood and offered his hand. David responded.

Nazar gripped the small, soft hand and stared hard into David’s eyes. “David, if you stay with the project, I will personally arrange for you to take the Hajj. I can’t spare you this year. Do you know the date of next year’s pilgrimage?”

“October twelfth.”

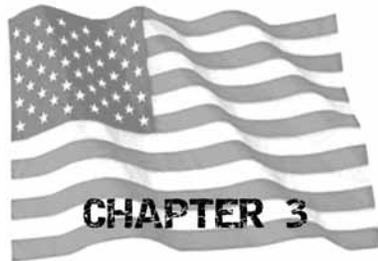
“Excellent. September and October next year you will take as paid vacation. I will arrange transportation and accommodations in Jeddah.”

“Thank you, Mr. Eudon.”

As David closed the office door, Nazar smiled to him-

self. Every Muslim was expected to complete the annual pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia at least once in their lives if they were able. After what Nazar had seen in the lab, David Baker was potentially the most critical resource in his empire. He had found an ironclad way to keep him tied to the project.

A way only a fellow Muslim could understand.



The prototype proved David's technology to be robust and scalable. Nazar pushed forward with construction of a commercial-scale ethanol production plant in the Arizona desert. David and the nanotech team moved to the new facility, and, fourteen months later, toward the middle of September, Nazar made good on his promise. David took eight weeks paid leave from the lab and flew home to Banquet, Ohio.

He paid the cab and ran up the path to his parents' double-wide. His visit would be a surprise. David knocked and watched through the window as his father pushed himself, weak-armed, out of his TV chair and shuffled across the living room to answer the door.

"Mama. It's Dawud!" his father shouted. He hugged his son and pulled him into the hallway.

David's mother ran to him and held his face in her hands. "Did you eat? Why didn't you call? I could have prepared dinner."

"Let the boy in, Mama." She released her grip on David and closed the front door.

"Baba, I have some news."

"How are you, my son?"

"I'm fine. Come. Sit."

He led his parents into the living room. They sat on the sofa, looking up at him like children, and waited for him to speak.

"In three weeks, I'm to take the Hajj."

His father began to cry. David waited. He knew they were tears of joy. Finally, his father spoke. "The son will complete the work of the father."

"Baba, you gave up your opportunity for the Hajj so I might achieve mine. Allah recognizes your sacrifice, as do I." David's voice cracked as he felt the power of the words.

"You must wear my Ihram. I brought it from home and held it safe hoping for the day I would hear these words from my firstborn."

"I am honored, Father." David's throat tightened with pride. His eyes too were filled with tears.

"Your mother will wash it tonight. When do you leave?" His father started to stand.

"Stay, Father, I don't leave until next week." His *baba* grunted as he sank back into the sofa. "I fly from Akron on October ninth direct to Saudi. Mr. Eudon has arranged transportation and my hotel in Jeddah. Hajj begins on the twelfth."

"Who will prepare you?"

"I have been studying, Father."

"No. No! You must be prepared. You should meet with Imam Ali."

"Father—"