

SAMARKAND

Our camels sway across the featureless desert towards the golden gates that breach the 80 feet high pink sandstone walls of Samarkand. Processions of rainbow colours flow in and out of archways either side of the imposing entrance; pilgrims, tribesmen, priests and traders attending the many markets selling anything from mysterious spices, exotic fruits, multi-coloured cloths and hand-woven carpets to goats and camels.

As we pass through the gate, the smells are intoxicating. Noises of friendly bartering, laughter over a shared hookah and giggles from half masked girls surround us. We weave our way to the centre of the city where a mosque, topped by a golden dome, stands on a hill like a giant block of quartz.

We dismount from our kneeling camels. I raise my left hand for my hawk to rest, grasp his jessies and hood his eyes to avoid causing him stress at the sight of the bustling spectacle. Resting my hand on the hilt of my scimitar, I follow the rest of the company as we ascend the white marble steps, decorated with intricate mosaics, that lead to the inner sanctum.

As we pass into the sepulchral interior, the sound of rhythmic chanting, punctuated by an eerie falsetto cry fills the room. The sweet heavy smell of frankincense hangs in the air. I feel the hairs stiffen on the back of my neck.