

The Ninth Quran

Part One

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INTRODUCTION

There exists a story, rarely ever spoken.

At the beginning of the Islamic conquest of the Middle East, just twelve years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, there rose a great Caliph known to history as Uthman. Accused of corruption from the earliest years of his reign, his grip on power was tenuous, even as the religion ignited like wildfire throughout his lands.

By 650AD the Caliph had grown concerned at the large variations appearing in the Quran as his domain spread beyond the Arabian Peninsula, into North Africa and Persia.

Fearing a fragmentation of his fledgling Caliphate, Uthman ordered a standard version of the holy text be prepared and distributed across the urban centres of the Islamic World. Soon, these new copies were dispatched with armed guards to the nine great cities of his growing empire, and local officials were ordered to burn their existing holy scriptures.

One by one, each city obeyed, and their unique Qurans were consumed by fire, never to survive the ages.

All except one, held in the City of Alexandria.

The Ninth Quran.

PROLOGUE

Alexandria, Egypt.

652AD

At sixty seven, Arethas was an old man. And hobbling on creaking knees through a deserted market in the dead of night, he felt older still. Yet time was pressing, and the Caliph's men were not far behind his little band.

"Hurry!" he hissed, urging on his cloaked followers with a frantic sweep of his arm.

There was his faithful acolyte, Justin, huffing and puffing with a corner of the crate he and his three equally young friends were carrying. Between them, they tottered on weakening limbs as its rough edges left bloody scrapes across their legs. The cargo's small size veiled the weight of its priceless contents that Arethas was only too aware of, and he wished he could do more to help than just will them onwards.

Bringing up the rear was a trio of servants. They were the last ones remaining of the fifteen that had fled the palace with the old scholar, and they had been handpicked for this final task. Seeing their swords held in unpractised hands, Arethas could only hope that whoever had betrayed them was already dead; he couldn't bear the idea of reaching salvation only for the traitor to reveal himself.

While the fleeing men slipped between wood and cloth structures of lopsided market stalls, a clutch of beggars and drunks remained the only other souls in the high-walled square. Little more than smelly bodies clothed in rags, they were huddled in a large doorway beneath the warm night, their blissful snores drifting up to the glittering stars.

Arethas ran a dry tongue over cracked lips as he let the crate go bumbling by, tasting sea salt on the breeze. They weren't far now. But neither were the Caliph's men. The terrible sounds of distant street fighting had died some minutes ago, and that meant the inexperienced rearguard had either surrendered or been slaughtered to a man. Now the glow of approaching torches reflected off yellow stone at the market entrance, and the sight almost made the scholar's heart burst from his chest. The clink of bronze helms and chainmail armour was building, regimented thuds echoing like a foreboding drumroll.

"Go! Fly, damn you!" Arethas exhorted his followers, shoving one of his servants ahead with a panicked slap on the shoulder.

Their pace increased, and they fled the north end of the market as the first soldiers arrived from the south. An order was barked and arrows were nocked. A host of whistling missiles ricocheted off old stone as Arethas was last to dash round the corner out of sight. Hunching his cloaked back, he forced himself to stay focussed on the task ahead as they loped down an alley before coming out onto a main street. Sand-swept cobbles glided down to a distant quay where moored ships lay anchored, their masts and rigging lit up a brilliant, deep orange by the great Lighthouse of Alexandria.

The towering beacon stood alone on its own island at the very tip of a slender isthmus. Over three hundred feet tall, it was a marvel of Greek engineering. Statues of Triton stood at its four corners beneath a giant brazier where a fire raged. The brilliant light was directed by a huge mirror that threw the soaking rays out across the Mediterranean Sea. At the very top,

overlooking the expanse of his domain, a bronze Poseidon glowered down on all who dared enter and depart Alexandria's harbour.

Without pause, the flagging men staggered on, following the wide street ever downwards past fishermen's ramshackle dwellings. During the day, carts would fight for this space as slaves worked to load and unload the vast fleet of trade ships. But tonight the place was quiet and calm as though the whole city was holding its breath.

Approaching the harbour entrance, Arethas gave a sigh of relief at seeing the gates left open. Though the harbour master would not be helping his little band in their effort to escape with their treasure intact, it seemed he had agreed to not hinder them at least. The scholar cast his eyes towards a single-storey home at the far side and imagined the overweight man tucked up in bed, eyes wide open, ears strained for the sounds of fighting at his precious harbour.

A muted signal was given, and the railed gates were closed behind them, a sword shoved across to bar the way, at least for a moment. Whipping back the hood of his cloak, Justin wiped his brow with a free hand to reveal a mop of brown, curly hair. Its long strands were plastered to his head while wisps of a scraggly beard on his pale chin belied his young age. Fear had widened his dark eyes, and they swivelled over the faces of his equally scared friends, each one grasping the crate like his life depended on it.

"There!" Arethas directed them, pointing out a single-masted ship bobbing beside the quay, just two hundred feet from where they stood. The shallow-bottomed vessel was almost lost in a row of boats stretching away. Yet its captain, a tall, sturdy-legged man of forty years had already seen them and was ordering his crew to make ready with the tide.

A set of pinging rattles had Arethas pivot to look back. The Caliph's men were jogging down the street for the harbour, some archers loosening arrows as they ran. A few of the barbed missiles were striking the gates and whizzing past to skitter across worn cobblestones.

Without words, the scholar hurried his band towards their waiting ship, its white sail unfurling against a dull orange cast by the lighthouse. More arrows rained overhead as the pursuing Saracens reached the gates, and one missile buried itself into the crate's side with a thudding whack.

As one, the three servants of their group drew to a stop, and with a nod to his master, their leader turned on his heels to return to the gates, sword brandished in an unsteady hand. The Caliph's men were making short work of its rudimentary lock, and Arethas counted at least twenty glinting helms before an arrow whistled past his head. A scream went out, and he looked to see one of Justin's companions fall to a knee, arrowhead buried deep into his bleeding calf. The crate's unsupported corner fell with a sickening crack, and Arethas hauled it up in gnarled, ink-stained hands, urging the other three to keep moving. They were just fifty yards from their ship, its impatient timbers creaking against hemp ropes anchoring its hull to the quayside.

A clash of steel rang out as the loyal servants put up a brave but hopeless defence at the gates, and tortured screams were cut short as they were hacked down where they stood. With massive legs bridging the gap between land and sea, the ship's captain beckoned the exhausted survivors on. No sooner had they reached the vessel's edge than a host of grasping, weatherbeaten hands reached out from the dark, and crewmembers hauled the battered crate up onto the deck.

As the others were helped aboard, Arethas looked down the quay where moored boats gently rocked on either side. The young man crippled by the arrow was pleading for his life as the first blood-flecked Saracen approached. The pitiful whimpering became a shriek as an outstretched arm was cut clean off by a single sword stroke. The severed limb splashed into the water before a second slice delivered the killing blow. A stilled body slumped to the cobbles, and without slowing their pace, the Caliph's men stepped over a growing puddle of blood.

Arrows rained onto the ship's deck as Justin was hauled aboard, and the student reached out for his teacher.

"Go!" Arethas called to him. Unsheathing a sword at his belt, he sliced at the final rope holding the ship to the quay, and the boat was pushed away with long oars. He allowed himself a single look at his protege whose frightened hands were gripping the rail.

"Remember my instructions! And trust no-one!"

Mouth agog, Justin could only watch in horror as twenty or more of the Caliph's soldiers converged on his master, alone at the pier's end. Flinging aside his cloak, Arethas revealed a simple tunic belted at the waist. Compared to the panting, armoured men surrounding him, the scholar looked tiny. He raised his sword, but a powerful, gloved hand gripped his wrist, and the weapon clattered to the stones.

"You will never stop the secret from getting out," Arethas told their angry, snarling faces.

The lead warrior looked past the scholar's left ear to where the escaping ship's prow was silhouetted against a burnished night. Flames from the lighthouse reflected off the lapping waves, making it appear as though the sea itself was on fire. "The secret dies with you, old man," he spat, and unsheathing a gleaming dagger, he stabbed Arethas through the stomach.

Gasping at the cold sensation spreading through his guts, Arethas collapsed against the warrior's armoured shoulder. As his vision blurred and dimmed, he summoned enough strength to whisper in the man's ear before he was kicked off the quay's edge, to be cast into the sea.

"This secret cannot die... while there are those with the courage to keep it."

CHAPTER ONE

The Ruined City of Petra, Jordan.

Present day

“Shit and piss,” Omar muttered, gazing at a faint inscription chiselled into the ancient stone floor at his sandalled feet. Crafted almost 1400 years ago and hidden by the literal sands of time, it was being unveiled before his eyes under the dextrous hand of his research partner, Dr Zahra Gamil.

Crouched on her haunches, Zahra’s attention was focussed solely on her painstaking work with the excavation brush. A pair of smudged aviator sunglasses were perched on her head where long black hair was drawn into a messy ponytail. A faded dark tank top covered a myriad of sweat patches from the desert heat and revealed the glistening, tanned skin of her lithe arms. Her equally tanned legs, toned from countless hours of digging, walking, lifting and carrying, were flawless save for a patchwork of white scarring on the outside of her left thigh. The melted skin had an unusually elongated shape that was a full inch wide yet carried a length unknown to Omar since it disappeared beneath the material of her khaki cargo shorts. Crouching beside her, he glanced at it, and wondered just how high it might go before wiping his sweating face with the cuff of a floral shirt.

If Zahra’s aviators and ponytail were her trademark look, then Omar’s floral shirts were his. From the moment he had arrived at the dig site three years ago, a day hadn’t gone by that his stocky frame wasn’t covered by a garish design. Whether it was his stark Hawaiian colours, or more neutral pastel shades, Zahra could always count on Dr Omar Faraj to bring a temporary smile to her face every time he climbed the rocky terrain to their archaeological tent each morning.

Their day this morning had started off like most others. After a simple briefing with their sole PhD student over cooled black tea, they’d turned up the covers of their tent and stepped over the threshold of an unearthened 6th Century Byzantine homestead. Or rather the crumbled remains of a 6th Century Byzantine homestead. So far, little more than a basic floor plan and a few inches of stone wall had been unearthed in this latest excavation, and unlike most of Petra’s other sites, it hadn’t offered up any secrets. Or at least it hadn’t until their PhD student had excitedly hopped out of the tent to declare her discovery lying beneath a couple inches of untouched dirt. Zahra and Omar had stepped out for a fifteen minute break to stretch their aching backs and take in Petra’s rose-pink scenery like a cool glass of water. And that was all it had taken for the pair to miss their discovery of the year. Perhaps their discovery of the decade. *It just had to be her who’d found it*, Zahra now thought to herself as she swept away the remaining grains. *An American.*

A Harvard graduate and current Cambridge student, Louise Mayer had all the makings of a bright yet unremarkable archaeologist. Having gotten as far as she could on her father’s wealth, her 6 month placement with Zahra had helped fund the struggling researcher’s dig at Petra for a while longer. Yet that pot of money was running out fast, and with precious few results to show for the last three years, her main funder was threatening to withdraw their support entirely. *But this inscription...this inscription might change everything.*

“Have you got that photograph?” Zahra asked, placing the brush to one side and wiping her palms down her shorts.

Omar fidgeted to draw out his phone. “Here,” he said, handing it over.

Zahra peered at a cracked screen showing the image of a clay tablet broken in three pieces and missing its bottom left hand corner. Two rulers placed at right angles gave its measurement as 11 inches by 7. Old Arabic had been impressed into its surface when the clay had still been wet, and just below the top edge was an imprint, like a sigil. It was this she now compared against her floor marking.

“It’s the same,” she said after a long purse of her lips. “It has to be. Justin’s seal.” Omar’s phone was handed back, and her fellow archaeologist screwed up his bronzed face.

“Shit and piss,” he muttered again. It was his favourite curse.

Taking up the brush, Zahra shifted her weight onto her knees and swished away some fine dust, placing her face just inches from the surface. “See this seam in the stone?” she observed, running a finger along an almost imperceptible line forming a large square like a perfectly fitted paving slab. “There’s another level beneath our feet. Who knows what we might find down there?” Turning her gaze on Omar, she threw her colleague an excited grin. This was the Zahra Gamil he loved to see; her flushed, sun-kissed face speaking only of the endless devotion she had to her work, all their funding problems and Jordanian permit restrictions momentarily forgotten. And at thirty five, she still carried the youthful exuberance of someone ten years her junior. Gifted with a smooth brow, shining eyes and wrinkle-free smile, Zahra carried the nickname of Cleopatra amongst the male-dominated archaeology teams that had licences to work at Petra. *And she has a killer figure to go with the looks*, Omar thought to himself as he forced his eyes not to wander. Then a thought struck him.

“The traces of animal fur we found last week. If they really had been part of a rug—”

“-it makes sense that it would have covered the floor in this part of the house,” Zahra finished for him with a definite nod. She placed a fingertip beside the double-lined inscription, each graceful letter at least three inches tall. “This confirms it; we’re sitting in the home of Justin.”

“Student of Arethas himself,” Omar breathed. Rising painfully to his feet, he looked about their small dimensions beneath a rippling tent canopy and scratched his stubbled cleft chin. “Do you maybe think-?”

The thin mesh of an opening was whisked aside, and Louise’s head poked through. Her reddened skin was glistening from a liberal coating of suncream she always kept plastered on; a curse of her red hair currently kept in check by a baseball cap. “Er, guys?” she nervously announced, glancing over her shoulder. “Those men you asked me to keep a watch for... they’re on their way up here.”

It was Zahra’s turn to screw up her face. “Shit!” she cursed in her native tongue. “Thanks Lou. Can you stall them for a minute?” she added in heavily accented English before scraping a pile of dirt together. Louise gave a faint nod and twirled a lock of hair around a finger before disappearing outside.

“Do you think this game will ever get old?” Omar asked behind a wry smile as he helped his colleague hide any trace of the floor’s inscription. The cold look Zahra gave him was all the reply he needed.

There was an otherworldly beauty to Petra, Omar had to admit. Standing at the crest of a rise leading down into the valley, he squinted at pink sandstone hills thrust up from the earth as though God had dragged them skyward with grasps of an invisible fist. It was into the sides of these natural monuments that the tombs and temples of Petra had been carved by decidedly human hands, the Herculean work beginning thousands of years ago, and only now being brought back to the scorching light once more.

The grand, Hellenistic facade of the famous Palace Tomb beckoned to him from a distance, as it had done since the moment he had first stood in its shadow, eyes pouring over its columns and lined arches cut from the living rock. Even this far away, he could see the toll that time and tourists had taken on the tired structure. During his past three years working at Petra, it had become like an old relative to him, bent and broken a little more each day, with nothing he could do to halt the decay.

Raising a hand against the oppressive sun, he gazed down upon Colonnaded Street in the distance, where remains of Roman columns followed its length down either side. Right now, tourists were scuttling over its dusty paving stones on their way to the Great Temple, like a decadent pilgrimage. The vast majority would have already visited the main attraction - the Treasury Building - and were now just banking a few more photographs to show friends back home.

Shifting his gaze upwards, Omar grumbled under his breath at the few reckless tourists who had paid some local Bedouins to take them via hidden paths up the hillsides. With the latest phones grasped in sweaty palms, they were now posing from the top of the ancient structures, aiming to get the best shot possible for their social media accounts. The whole thing was a narcissistic circus - and illegal as hell. Yet the Bedouins were only too happy to take the money, and the authorities didn't seem to care one bit about the damage being done to the priceless wonders.

If this is the future of humanity, we're all doomed, Omar thought as he watched one woman almost slip to her death at the edge of an outcrop as she attempted to get her best selfie possible, all for some clicks from jealous friends. Behaviour like that had used to get him angry, but today he gave a resigned shrug and turned back to their dig site nestled at the base of their own hill.

The excavation tent had its sides turned up to resemble more of a gazebo left standing on thin metal legs. In the shade of its linen roof, three serious-looking men were pouring over the Byzantine home, heavy boots leaving stark impressions in the sand. Dressed like something between paramilitary mercenaries and school teachers, they chatted quietly amongst themselves, at times covering their mouths in case their muffled words betrayed the clandestine discussion being had. *The Jordanian Ministry of Culture at its finest*, Omar inwardly seethed as he gazed at their backs. Eventually their leader muttered something inaudible before crouching to his haunches, right at the spot where Zahra had hurriedly covered up their find just a few minutes ago.

His olive green cargo trousers jarred with a grey shirt complete with rolled up sleeves and a black, skinny tie, left loose about his throat. The pinstripe waistcoat he wore was just the

icing on a very eclectic cake. On anyone else, it would have been too ridiculous to carry any shred of authority. But on this muscle-bound Englishman with floppy blonde hair and straight-backed posture, the outfit was menacing as hell to Omar.

If Zahra was in any way intimidated, she was doing a good job of hiding it. After being turfed out of their excavation site, she had decided to make full use of her time by giving Louise an impromptu lesson in the importance of preventing digsite contamination. At regular intervals, her accented English carried clearly to the three men who had decided to examine her notebook, and her indignant tone made her thoughts crystal clear. *They won't find anything in those notes*, Omar mused. Zahra was too clever for that.

"You haven't made much progress today," the Englishman observed, ruffling the corners of some pages. His Arabic was surprisingly good, its clear Egyptian dialect giving away his education.

"Funny how the more often you visit, the less progress we make," Zahra scoffed in reply. Hands bunched firmly on her hips, she took a wide stance, squaring up to the intruder.

A pair of blue eyes narrowed, and the book was snapped closed. Passing it to one of his colleagues, the Englishman took a step forward. "I'm just looking out for the interests of the Ministry, who may I remind you is funding your work out here. Everything you find belongs to them, and the people of Jordan. Don't forget that."

His wagging finger passed over each of the three archaeologists, and Zahra openly laughed in his face. "The people of Jordan," she snorted. "Is that what you tell yourself in the mirror, Ryan? That you're helping enrich the culture of the Jordanian people?"

"Isn't that why we're all out here?"

"Some of us, maybe. But not you. You're a lackey, a stooge."

It was her turn to step forward, and the pair glared at one another as they breathed-in mingled scents. Zahra's was earthy, her sweat-infused musk carrying floral high tones of her perfume. In contrast, Ryan's gym-incubated testosterone broke through like sharp garlic. It made her nose wrinkle. Watching the silent confrontation, Omar and Louise shared a look. For the time being, they were reduced to spectators in this gladiatorial combat. And it was Ryan who broke first, pushing his floppy fringe away from a glistening brow before letting out a tired sigh. "I'm only trying to preserve history, Za-"

"You're trying to preserve a *false* history, Ryan," she acidly replied. "One that fits a nice, neat story we've all been told since we were little children who didn't know any better."

Ryan sucked his teeth behind a growing snarl. "Of course, you have all the *real* answers, don't you?"

"I'm not the one willing to box up entire swathes of history like at the end of *Indiana Jones* for nothing more than to chase a Professorship!"

Back at the tent, Zahra's notebook was slapped on a trestle table littered with excavation tools, and Ryan's two Jordanian associates stepped outside in defence of their superior. They both shared similar thick moustaches clinging to their upper lips, and their light, baggy shirts ruffled in a fresh breeze coming in from the distant mountains. Ryan immediately waved them back. Unlike him, they weren't used to having a woman talk back so defiantly to a man. Especially one so scantily dressed as Zahra, her strong, brown limbs glistening under hot sun.

"You need to start thinking straight," Ryan told her in a low murmur. "You need to start asking yourself whose weekly reports are shining a favourable light on your endeavours,

keeping you in a job.” He placed a calloused hand on her bare shoulder. There was something in the suppleness of her clammy skin that stirred something deep in his core. “And a little gratitude goes a long way out here, Zahra.”

The archaeologist bristled under his touch, and she batted his hand aside. “You can stick that kind of gratitude up your ar-”

“Guys, please. Can we keep things civil?” Omar called out to them in English, arms raised from his sides.

Ryan looked him over through a sly squint, gaze hovering at the garish floral shirt and baggy shorts cut off below the knee. Then his eyes fell on Zahra’s motorcycle, parked a few yards away on its side stand. The tall adventure bike was her pride and joy. Its spoked wheels glinted in the sun while a matt black fuel tank absorbed the harsh rays. A set of off-road tyres were worn right to the edges, a testament to her skills at the handlebars. “From now on, you park that thing at the visitor centre and walk here like everyone else,” he grunted. “If we’re going to be civil, you’re going to follow the rules.”

Zahra inwardly winced. *Fuck*. Being able to ride the sweeping, rocky terrain to her dig site each morning had been a guilty pleasure of hers since the beginning of her work at Petra. So far, everyone had turned a blind eye to her bending of the rules. *Ryan must be seriously pissed off today*, she told herself, keeping a scowl on her face. “My God, how will I ever cope?” she sarcastically retorted, clapping her cheeks with both hands. “Please forgive me, Dr Turnbull.”

Ryan’s fist clenched, and for a split second, Zahra thought he might actually lash out at her. Their regular verbal sparring sessions had always been just that - verbal. But something felt different today. It was as though he could read glimpses of her mind and sensed she was holding back. “Don’t forget; I know your history, Zahra,” he growled. “I know all about your father, and your past lectures in Cairo.” Straightening up, he gestured to his men. Come on.”

Zahra shielded her eyes to watch all three stomp away, dust kicking up from their toe caps. “Louise, what do you call men like that where you come from?” she asked without shifting her gaze.

“Creeps,” Louise replied, blowing a chod of pink bubblegum between her lips until it broke with an audible pop. “Who is he again?”

“That was Dr Ryan Turnbull, loyal consultant for the Ministry of Culture,” Omar replied.

“Ministry of Cunts,” Zahra grunted. She always spoke her most vulgar curses in English.

Louise frowned. “But why does he pick on us every week?”

“Don’t worry, it’s not just our dig,” Omar grinned. “He’s responsible for all the Petra teams the Government funds.”

“Why?”

“Control,” Zahra interjected. “They only recognise those discoveries that fit with their view of history. Anything that doesn’t confirm their biases is either hidden, or altered.”

“But isn’t finding new things the reason we’re here? To better our understanding of history?”

Zahra flashed her protege a wry smile. “You won’t go far with that attitude, Louise.” Squinting down the hill at the backs of the retreating men, she bit down on her bottom lip. “Alright, let’s get back to it. We should have the rest of the day to ourselves at least.”

Ducking under a tent pole, she stepped inside their dig and surveyed the heavy boot prints left behind. A few had even been made on top of the small dirt pile in the corner. *Lucky they didn't do any thorough checks*, Zahra mused. A single swipe of the foot was all it would have taken to reveal the hidden inscription.

"Sorry about your bike," Omar said, scratching a patch of receding hair as he drew beside her.

She shrugged. "It was always going to happen eventually. I just pushed my luck too far today. Besides, he's right, really. I shouldn't be riding up and down here in front of the tourists; it's not a good look." They both gazed out at the multicoloured dots climbing all over the worn ruins in the distance and shared a sigh.

While Zahra and Louise got to work removing the cover of dry dirt, Omar let down the tent's sides to protect against any prying eyes. This time, they were able to reveal the entire paving stone displaying Justin's seal in the middle. A fine seam along its defined edges didn't even permit a fingernail to get a purchase as the three of them strained to lift the heavy block. After drawing blood under a raised nail, Zahra sat back, licking the stinging digit.

"Drill?" Omar suggested, wiping his brow.

"Drill," she nodded, blowing on sore fingertips.

After photographing and measuring the paving stone in situ - a full 4ft square - Zahra and Louise made way for Omar with his electric drill. Its long bit had a diamond edge designed to go through solid stone. Placing its tip a few inches in from the nearest corner, he shared a look with the other two before murmuring a quick prayer. "Sorry, Justin," he said, glancing at the inscription. Wiping away a fresh bead of sweat from his temple, he pressed down on the trigger.

The noise and dust only added to the stifling heat in their confined space. Taking a slug of water from a canteen, Zahra crouched down and sloshed some of its contents where the drill was grinding through the thick sandstone. She could tell Omar was being careful not to risk cracking the slab by backing off every few seconds to let the heat dissipate.

"You know, there could be a vacuum in there," she said during one such lull. Handing her canteen to Louise, she watched the young student promptly pour a glug down the back of her neck. An involuntary shiver coursed through her frame at the pleasant chill.

Omar's drill bit had sunk two inches by the time it gave way without warning, the tool almost wrenching from his grasp as it was pulled down by an unseen force. Its solid chock struck the slab's surface, and all three watched as dampened dust was drawn into the hole with an audible hiss.

"You're right," Omar breathed. "There *was* a vacuum holding it down." He waited for the pressure to equalise before drawing out the drill.

"How's that possible after all this time?" Louise asked, gazing down at the tiny hole they'd made, imagining all the possible treasures that might be entombed below.

"The only way we'll find out is by lifting the lid," Zahra replied, and she gave Omar a nod to begin a second pilot hole.

Minutes ticked by as the ancient sandstone grudgingly gave way under the modern tool. What would have taken an ancient master stoneworker a day to complete was done in half an hour, albeit with a change of batteries halfway through.

Eventually, though, four neat holes had been made close to each corner, and Zahra took over to insert a threaded bolt into each one.

Shaking off his numbed wrist, Omar rose on creaking joints and took a grateful pull on the offered canteen. Huge sweat patches had broken out under his arms. "Looz, could you get the tripod?" he asked, wiping his mouth. He never could pronounce Louise's name properly.

Doing as asked, she brought the heavy apparatus from outside, and its legs were soon positioned around the slab. Clipping a chain sling to each bolt's eyelet, it was left to Zahra to haul on the lifting hoist, drawing its rattling chain hand over hand. The moment she took the weight of the slab, her arm muscles bunched, and even the hoist's gearbox squeaked in protest as the heavy stone was pulled up from its snug socket. The moment it swung clear from the floor, the tripod was rolled to one side and a flashlight was produced to shine down on the gaping square hole.

"Look at that!" Zahra gasped.

All three crowded round the opening, heads touching as they knelt to peer within the perfectly preserved confines.

"Allah is great indeed," Omar noted, subconsciously drawing out an ivory charm he kept around his neck on a leather thong. Pressing its smooth surface to his cracked lips, he let it dangle as he gazed in awe at a red clay writing tablet held up on a small stone platform.

The torch's white light bounced off a matt surface littered with strange impressions of an ancient language. But Zahra's immediate attention fell on the tiny stone prison itself.

"See how smooth these surfaces are? Like glass," she observed, running a finger across a top lip the slab had rested on. "It would have allowed a perfect seal."

Taking a pencil from his shirt pocket, Omar risked a delve down one side of the tablet. The rubber tip disturbed a covering of ash resting at the very bottom. "It's a kiln," he announced. "A fire was lit underneath when the tablet was lowered, and the lid was placed on top when it was still red hot."

"And as it cooled, it created a vacuum that's held for...maybe thirteen hundred years," Zahra finished, shaking her head at the ingenuity on display.

"To think that they knew about air pressure, and the effect of cold and heat..." Omar laughed in amazement. "This alone is a great discovery, Zahra!"

"I know," she grinned, cheeks flushed in vindication. Angling the flashlight, she frowned at the alien text. "What kind of language is that, do you think?"

"Not sure," he replied, stopping himself from running a mucky finger over the indentations. "It looks like a precursor to Arabic. There are no dots or anything."

"Hmm." Zahra sat up and rifled through a pocket to draw out her phone. Unlocking the screen, she rubbed a thumb over its smeared camera lens and glanced at a cartoon bear on its back cover. "I'll take a photo. I have a guy who might be able to translate it."

"Put the phone down."

The cold voice was both strange and familiar. Turning around, Zahra froze in shock, blood curdling in her veins. Her open-mouthed horror was underlit by her phone's screen, its camera poised at the clay tablet below as she gazed up at Louise. Standing just inside their tent's opening, the PhD student held a cold, sleek gun in both hands. The order had been spoken in perfect Arabic, her usual Texas drawl forgotten. The two archaeologists had never heard her utter so much as a word in their native tongue before.

Omar was the first to recover, and he shifted on his knees. “Looz? What the fuck are you-?” “I said, put the phone down.” The gun was aimed at Zahra’s head.

A single look at her student’s grim expression was enough for Zahra to understand the threat was deadly serious. One wrong move, one wrong word, and the trigger would be pulled. She raised a hand and gently motioned for the gun to be lowered. “Louise, if someone’s put you up to this-”

Her words were cut off by a mirthless laugh. “You have no idea, Doctor.” Louise’s lip-balmed smirk curled into a bitter snarl beneath the baseball cap, and she took out a phone of her own. It was slim and sleek save for an overly large antenna sticking out the top. A satellite phone. Placing it to her ear, she waited for it to connect in a series of beeps.

Making a nervous swallow, Omar shifted on his haunches and was rewarded with the gun pointed at him instead. A click came from the phone’s earpiece as a person on the other end picked up. “They’ve found the tablet,” Louise declared in Arabic. Her voice was mechanical, eyes devoid of their previous shine. While the other two looked on in a mix of fear and shock, a mumbled order came through the tinny speaker like static. “Yeah, ok.”

Disconnecting the line with a press of a button, she slipped the phone into her shorts’ pocket and firmed her grip on the gun.

Zahra risked a glance down at the mobile in her hand, its screen showing the image she’d already taken of the tablet. There was no cellular signal up here, no way to call for help. Off to her left, the tent’s loose canvas flapped in the breeze, affording glimpses of her motorcycle waiting in the bright sun outside. *If I can just distract her for a moment...* “Who are you working for? The Government?” she called out with a rueful shake of her head. “Louise, whatever they’ve told you, whatever they might be paying you-”

“You think I’m doing this for money?!” Spittle flew from Louise’s lips as her face contorted in a flash of anger. “You have no right to uncover the secret. It has to die. Now give me your phone.” Her gun hand trembled as she motioned for the mobile to be handed over.

But Zahra calmly rose to her feet, keeping her knees slightly bent like a coiled spring. With a deft flick, she locked her phone and gazed at the home screen. It was a photograph of a photograph. In it, her younger self beamed a huge grin behind a pair of oversized aviators in the scorching Egyptian heat. The Great Pyramid of Giza sat serene in the background while a much older man smiled for the camera beside her. The grey in his beard outnumbered the black, and his eyes had wrinkled into permanent slits from decades spent on excavations in the desert sands. Just seeing it tied a knot in her stomach.

“You want it?” A shard of ice had entered Zahra’s voice despite a bead of sweat tracking down her cheek. “Here, take it.”

The phone flew at Louise’s head like a guided missile, striking her above the left eyebrow. Grabbing Omar by his sleeve, Zahra dragged him along, and his foot disappeared into their uncovered void, smashing the fragile clay tablet to pieces. Letting out a horrified cry, he instinctively went to check on the damage but Zahra wouldn’t let him. Instead they burst out of the tent, her pulling him every step of the way. From inside, two wild gunshots ripped holes through the fabric, bullets missing by inches.

All thoughts of their discovery now forgotten, the pair converged on Zahra’s motorcycle, and she shoved a key into the ignition. Its dials lit up, and she scrambled into the saddle while Omar leapt onto the pillion seat. Firing up the engine, she checked a wing mirror to see

Louise stagger out of the tent, clutching a bleeding head. Gritting her teeth, the young woman aimed the gun and fired another two shots. The mirror shattered, and Zahra stamped on her gear shifter to roar away, kicking up stones and dust from her back tyre.

Clutching the grab rails, Omar shouted something, but Zahra couldn't hear him over the screaming engine. Leaving the crest of their hill, they dropped down over rough terrain, she navigating them round the bigger rocks with practised touches on the handlebars. Ahead to their north was a wadi, its dry riverbed snaking towards the nearest town; Uum Sayhoun. If they could just reach the outskirts unharmed, she knew they could raise the alarm. Beyond that, her adrenaline-soaked mind couldn't think of anything.

Vibrations rattled up her arms as the bike's shock absorbers bottomed out, and more than once the back end threatened to drift as she kept losing grip over lethal scree. Yet with every metre of distance she put between themselves and Louise, her breathing became less ragged, and the pounding in her ears lessened.

That's when she saw the two SUVs in the distance. Their black, glossy bodies were bobbing up and down as they pelted over rough ground, clouds of dust billowing behind. Skidding to a stop, Zahra swore, and a fresh bout of adrenaline coursed through her veins. Beyond the two vehicles was the small town, shimmering in a heat haze but now hopelessly out of reach. Behind her, the hill rose up, leading back to their digsite where Louise was doubtless directing the SUVs through her sat phone.

Omar's rapid breathing carried over the sound of Zahra's grunting engine. "Wh-What do we do, Zahra? They got us trapped!" he stammered.

Shifting down into first gear, Zahra swore again as her mind raced. The SUVs were growing louder, their tinted windows reflecting the sun's harsh glare. "Back to Petra," she replied at last, twisting her throttle. "It's our only chance."

Powering back up the hill, they soon crested the rise, and the bike went airborne. A shocked Louise stood right in their path, phone pressed to her ear, and she dived out of the way as the bike landed hard. Zahra's grip was almost wrenched from the bars as they bounced past the tent, continuing towards a line of meandering tourists plodding along Collonaded Street in the distance.

The more powerful SUVs were catching up, and they now bellowed over the rise where one of them stopped in a cloud of dust to pick up Louise. Yelling instructions, she climbed into the passenger seat, and the sleek vehicle roared off in hot pursuit.

The lightweight, modern roof of Petra's Byzantine church provided Ryan Turnbull with a welcome respite after his morning spent under the beating sun. Murmuring some words of encouragement to a worker restoring a patch of priceless mosaic floor, he accepted a bottle of water from one of his associates and stepped outside.

The scorching rays had weight behind them, and he was forced to close his eyes as he took a glug of the cool liquid. Humming his approval, he looked up the rise and imagined Zahra toiling away over the top of the crest. Of all the international research teams he oversaw at Petra, hers caused him the most headaches. Yet he couldn't deny her dedication, even if her theories were getting increasingly deranged of late. A burning regret welled in his chest as he

thought back to his outburst, and he considered returning up the hill to apologise but changed his mind at the last second. Turning on booted heels to continue down for Collonaded Street, an urgent drone over his shoulder drew him short.

Twisting round, his mouth fell to the floor as he watched a familiar motorcycle come screaming down the slope chased by one - no, two - SUVs, one after the other. Plumes of yellow dust trailed in their wake as they crunched over the ancient rocks, heedless of whatever damage they might be doing to the heritage site.

The water bottle fell from his grasp, its spilled contents hissing over hot sands as he hurried over to flag them down, an angry shout already passing his lips. But the three vehicles weren't slowing down. In fact, they were speeding up, and Ryan could now see Omar gripping onto his pillion bars behind Zahra, face contorted in a mask of terror. Ryan's arms flapped like broken windmill sails as he raced to put himself between the oncoming chase and the ancient treasure that was Collonaded Street, currently crammed with tourists.

Some of them had now looked up from their phones to see the oncoming commotion, and a few nudged one another in the ribs, believing they were watching the filming of some blockbuster movie.

Blasting past the blond haired archaeologist, the female bike rider cut across a fallen column and threaded her motorcycle between a couple still standing before bounding over a kerb and landing on the wide avenue. The ancient paving slabs where Roman Legions had once marched on their way to war were now seared with melted rubber as the bike skidded to a halt.

Coming up fast, the heavy SUVs burst through the tall kerb, blasting stonework across the avenue and pelting hapless tourists like a blunderbuss. A tinted window was rolled down, and a man wearing a black keffiyeh leant out, AK47 grasped in both hands.

Gunning her engine, Zahra raced off once more as the first cracks of gunfire echoed across the open expanse. This was no filming for a movie. Phones and belongings clattered to the ground as the crowds scattered, screams of terror rippling out to the blue sky.

Gathering himself up off the ground, Ryan grabbed a radio at his belt and began shouting into it, wild eyes locked on the receding chase the entire time. Muzzle flashes blazed from both SUVs, and he could make out puffs of dust where bullets sprayed the ground at Zahra's fleeing bike.

Blaring on her horn, Zahra weaved between the scattering crowds as best she could. The regular paving on Collonaded Street soon gave way to deep sand of the Street of Facades, and her offroad tyres sent up a fountain of coarse grains in her wake. Up ahead, the hills housing the Royal Tombs rose up at a terrifying rate. She had walked this route countless times, enjoying her tranquil settings amongst the ruins of this mysterious ancient city. But now it all whisked by like a speeding carousel. On her right, the open air amphitheatre whipped by, and she barely registered a group of tourists gawping after her before the roaring SUVs sent them scrambling up rows of stone benches like ants. Glued to the pillion seat, Omar let go of the grab rails to wrap his arms around her narrow waist for dear life.

"Zahra!" he shouted in her ear. "We can't go through the canyon! We'll never make it!"

Even as the words flew from his mouth, the tall hills began hemming them in on both sides, squeezing their route towards Petra's crown jewel; the Treasury Building itself. A spray of bullets churned the ground on their right, and she twisted the throttle even more.

We have to.

“Ok folks, if you’ve taken all your photographs, let’s continue with the tour.”

Motioning for his party of ten to congregate around him, the guide took a sip from his dented water canteen and waited patiently for the inevitable stragglers. Like most English-speaking groups he was tasked with showing around Petra, there were individuals representing those he liked to place into three general categories. There was the chaotic family with mum, dad and their two kids in tow. It was clear the parents had turned down a visit to Disneyland to fund this cultural trip, and their offspring were still sore about it, dragging their feet before a real wonder of the ancient world.

Next were the retired group, cooking like lobsters beneath pressed slacks and polo shirts. And finally there was the young couple, by far the most insufferable category the tour guide had to bear with each day. So far, this pair had acted like they were the stars *and* directors of their own movie. Whether it was their excessive poses in front of the giant Treasury building, or their demands for a couple of sitting camels to be moved to one side so as not to spoil their shot, they always made their obnoxious presence known to every soul around them. And they’d brought enough camera equipment to shoot a Hollywood blockbuster.

“When do we get to go up there?” the young woman now asked, pointing at a ledge high above their heads. Bathed in glowing sunlight, it provided a view overlooking the treasury from above, and she pursed her lips in envy at those looking down on them in the canyon right at that moment.

The tour guide forced a smile. “We have to follow the mountain trail to reach it. But don’t worry, we’ll get there shortly.” He clapped his hands for everyone’s attention. “Now, you’ve had a good look at the Treasury, but did any of you notice anything unusual?” He waited the obligatory five seconds while members of his group took another clueless look at the building. Cut into the canyon’s rock face, its Hellenistic architecture was breathtaking to behold. Six columns held up a grand portico entrance, its opening flanked by statues of Castor and Pollux. Above, six more columns were cut deeper into the cliff, giving the edifice a truly three-dimensional quality. Right at the top was a stone urn, and it was this the tour guide fixed his attention on. “Its facade is riddled with bullet holes,” he said, putting his group out of its misery. “There’s a funny story about that; sometime in the first half of the twentieth century, there was a rumour that the stone urn at the very top contained riches, so the local bedouins who would camp here overnight often took potshots in the hope of breaking it open.” He beamed a wide grin. “Of course, there’s no truth to the rumour; the urn itself is solid stone, like the rest of the structure. And we haven’t had anyone firing shots around here for a long, long-”

A commotion from further up the snaking canyon caught his attention. Turning his back on the group, he strained his ears, hardly believing he was hearing the sounds of a high revving engine bouncing off the cliff walls.

“What the hell...?”

A motorcycle screamed into view, closely followed by two bellowing SUVs. A flock of tourists had to dive out of the way to avoid being run over, drinks and bags flying in every

direction as the chase roared past. The unmistakable shape of a gun barrel had the tour guide leap into action. "Everybody get back!" he yelled, lifting one of the pensioner's off her feet as he ran for the cover of the Treasury. His group scattered like a herd of cats, and the bark of gunfire had some throwing themselves down on their bellies, hands cradling their heads.

The guide had just enough time to slip behind one of the stone columns when the motorcycle performed a ninety degree slide. *No*, he thought to himself, staring at the female rider. *There's no way she'll go further down the canyon. No way.*

But opening her throttle, that's exactly what she did. Even more incredibly, the SUVs followed without pause, their wing mirrors tearing off against the rock faces as they skidded through the tiny gap. All that was left was a hanging cloud of dust and spent brass bullet casings littering the sand. Most people were left in shock. Some of the children were crying.

"Is everyone alright?!" The tour guide asked, putting down the terrified pensioner to check over his scattered group.

"Perfect!" an echoing voice called back. It was the male of the young couple, brandishing his phone as he sauntered over to his partner. "I got it all on camera, babe!"

Zahra's world had been reduced to the eye of a needle. On either side, sheer cliff faces rose to the sky, casting the canyon floor in perpetual shade. Dodging tourists left and right, she witnessed their expressions turn from disbelief, to anger, then finally horror as they saw the SUVs following close behind. Reduced to a 3 metre width in places, Zahra knew people would be dying behind her, crushed under the wheels of the metal monsters bearing down on them. *My God, this can't be happening*, she found herself repeating over and over at every crunching impact that reached her ears.

Heedless of the carnage, the lead SUV was gaining, and its 8 litre engine was so loud, she was certain its gore-choked grille must be grazing her back tyre. Up ahead, the canyon reached its narrowest point at a tight bend. Fresh adrenaline surged, and her world slowed as she slid her back wheel like a motocross rider, heel grazing the floor. The canyon wall kept coming, and just as she was about to crash against it, her rear tyre gained traction, and the bike roared away in its new direction, her final wing mirror tearing off against rough sandstone. The lead SUV wasn't so lucky. Unable to make the turn, it careened into the rock wall side-on, its doors practically imploding, glass shattering.

That must be it, it must be over, Zahra told herself, backing off the throttle as she kept her finger pressed on the horn. Tears streamed back across her face, and her lips had cracked from the constant wash of air. Bursting out of the canyon and into bright sunlight, she followed a gravel service road that led all the way to a gleaming visitor centre where oblivious tour guides were assembling their groups for a pleasant afternoon exploring Petra.

"We have to warn them!" Omar shouted over the sound of the engine.

"I know!" Zahra yelled back. Skidding to a halt outside the building, she killed the ignition and leapt out the saddle while Omar slid his backside off the pillion and followed her on weakened legs.

Bursting through the door, Zahra found the receptionist bagging up a customer's souvenirs. "Adi!" She yelled, brushing past a carousel of personalised keyrings. "Adi, you have to close the site down. And call emergency services!"

The receptionist looked over her with a worried frown. Shivering in the air-conditioned gift shop, Zahra was bathed in sweat and caked with dust. Her once messily-styled ponytail had come loose, and raven hair hung like matted vines either side of her face. "Zahra, what are you talking about?"

Placing her palms flat on the counter, the archaeologist went to repeat her demand when she realised her hands were shaking. The more she tried to control the trembling, the worse it got. Old horrors began to resurface, and she screwed her eyes tight, willing back hot tears that threatened to spill out.

It was left to Omar to explain as best he could, and her fellow archaeologist was barely able to stammer out the words when a distant SUV emerged from the canyon, black smoke pouring from its hood. Charging down the service road, spiderweb cracks across its windshield became visible to those gazing out at the strange sight from the visitor centre. Its entire side had been peeled back like a sardine can, and at least one tyre was punctured. But like a wounded animal, it came on, and now a second followed behind, in a far better condition.

"Oh shit! Come on, we have to go!" Grabbing Zahra's hand, Omar instinctively ran the way they had come back to her waiting bike. But it was hopeless; its overworked rear tyre was deflating before their eyes.

Pushing a handful of hair back from her face, Zahra looked around as the SUVs bore down on them. "Omar, where's your pickup truck?"

"Carpark."

As one, they gazed through a security turnstile to a fleet of vehicles in the front carpark. The turnstiles were designed to allow people through one way only. Anyone leaving the site had to go through the visitor centre's gift shop, by order of Petra's financial advisors. The pair shared a look and ran back through the centre, knocking over the keyring carousel as they went.

"Hey! What do you think you're-?!"

Whatever Adi was about to say next was cut off by the three tonne juggernaut crashing through his gift shop in a hail of brick, wood and glass. The counter was torn from its floor fixings, and the entire place was chewed up as Zahra and Omar sprinted for the rear fire exit.

Barging the door open, they half ran, half fell down an embankment and dropped behind a low stone wall just as the SUV flew over their heads to smash into a set of security bollards. Grabbing hold of one another in the ensuing silence, the pair limped away to put as much distance between them and the scene as possible.

Up ahead in the carpark, a military jeep took up residence near the main gates as it had every day for as long as anyone could remember; a precaution against any possible terrorist attack. Its two occupants now jumped out in their military fatigues. Rifles raised, they filtered through the growing crowd of chattering spectators who parted for them like the Red Sea.

The SUV's passenger door swung open and Louise flopped out in a mass of limbs, her baseball cap long gone. Multiple cuts had opened across one side of her face, and one of her arms was bleeding from her shoulder. Whimpering and crying at the approaching soldiers,

she pointed hysterically at the wrecked vehicle, acting every inch the terrified, innocent Westerner. Thinking her a hostage, the two military men kept their rifles trained on the driver's seat. But the moment their backs were turned, she dropped the pretence. Drawing a gun from her belt, Louise shot them both through the back of the head.

The effect was instantaneous as panic erupted. Tourists and tour guides alike fought to get away while Zahra and Omar staggered to his battered white pickup truck. Wrenching open its doors, they dived onto front seats littered with sweet wrappers, and Omar fought with trembling fingers to get his key in the ignition.

The second black SUV rolled through the destroyed visitor centre and halted to pick up Louise. Just before she got inside, she pointed out the solitary pickup truck rumbling to life in the middle of the car park. Seeing it all through a cracked wing mirror, Zahra madly put on her seatbelt.

“Go, Omar. Drive!”

CHAPTER TWO

“Have we lost them? Can you see them?”

Twisting his steering wheel, Omar dodged a parked car in a spray of gravel. Since flooring it out of Petra, his foot had barely lifted from the metal as he sped them north, following a dirt road.

“I don’t know.” Zahra was twisted in her seat, feeling increasingly sick as she watched the view fall away through the rear window. All she could see was an empty road, partly veiled in the dust cloud they were making. The last remaining SUV had dropped away after Omar had cut through an alley, knocking bins aside like skittles before leaving the local town behind them. They were now directionless, going wherever the road would take them.

“What the hell is going on, Zahra?”

“I don’t know!”

Omar bit his lip and shifted down a gear to take a sharp corner. Vibrations from the broken surface rippled through their seats. “I mean, she tried to kill us, and for what? A clay tablet? What’s on it that can be so God-damned important?”

“I don’t-” Zahra cut herself off before she could start repeating herself. “I need time to think.”

Omar shook his head. “We should go to a police station, tell them what’s happened. God knows how many people have died back there.”

Going to a police station seemed like a bad idea to Zahra. Cupping her hands over her eyes, she wiped sweat-streaked dirt from her face, and it sparked an image from the past. She was inside a dark, stone tomb listening to the clank of chains while she cooked in a wet, stifling heat. When she drew her hands away, her eyes fell on the footwell where scrunched chocolate bar wrappers littered the worn floor beneath her caked boots. “We should get out of the country. While we still can.”

Omar risked flashing her a sidelong glance as he navigated the treacherous road. “Why? What are you not telling me?” His grip tightened on the wheel. “What have you gotten me into, Zahra?”

She looked to him, and a pit opened in her stomach. “Omar, I’m sor-”

The seatbelt lock engaged as her weight was thrown forward, and their pickup screeched to a halt with Omar’s heavy foot on the brake pedal. A single vehicle was blocking the road just past a bend, and a police officer was climbing out to approach them, hand resting on a gun at his belt.

“Shit, what now?” Omar seethed, already rolling down his window.

Zahra watched the officer approach, the flashing lights of his police car bringing a lump to her throat. He wore a bulletproof vest over his blue uniform, making him appear larger than he really was. “Have they been told about what happened at Petra already?”

“I don’t know, let me do the talking.”

Approaching Omar’s window, the gruff officer peered inside at the two dishevelled occupants, a suspicious squint sweeping over Zahra’s legs. A cut was bleeding down her shin, and her wild hair showed only the hint of its once styled ponytail. Omar’s stubbled face had a pale sheen, his floral shirt long sweat-stained, hands trembling on the wheel.

As Zahra focussed her gaze on the flashing blue lights ahead, some grunted instructions were issued, and Omar reached across to pop his glovebox open. Its door practically dropped into his passenger's lap, and she watched as old CDs were brushed aside for a clutch of documents. While muttered words were spoken between the officer and driver, she stared blankly at the scratched CD covers. They were all cheesy eighties rock ballads; Omar's favourite genre.

"Stay there." Taking Omar's licence, the officer walked back to his car where he reached inside to talk over the radio. Seconds ticked by, and Zahra's skin crawled as she imagined their pursuers getting ever closer. More than once, she glanced in the wing mirror, expecting to see a black SUV appear any moment, gun barrel aimed through a window.

With an abrupt flick of his wrist, the officer beckoned to Omar, and the archaeologist placed a hand on the door.

"Don't go. This doesn't feel right."

Zahra's weak protest was met by a lopsided smile. "It'll be fine," said Omar, patting her hand. "We'll be safe soon. Maybe he'll escort us to the nearest station?" Stepping out, he shut the door behind him, the air freshener tree swinging from the rear view mirror.

Zahra watched him go, and an invisible screw tightened in her chest. The change that had come over Louise hadn't made any sense. Where had she gotten the gun from? How did she speak such good Arabic? Who was she really? A niggling worry like a splinter was digging into a corner of her mind, its sharp point maddeningly out of reach. Sighing, she thudded against the headrest and watched the conversation taking place between Omar and the officer. Their muffled words were inaudible, and she silently willed the stern-looking official to let them continue on. Sat stationary in the middle of the road with hills rising on either side, they were a sitting duck. A melancholy cry overhead had her pressing her face to the cool window. A Barbary falcon was circling on warm air currents, the small bird of prey appearing like a child's kite, wing feathers rippling. Zahra watched it glide over the road, heading for the wide open, arid landscape. In that moment, she wished she had wings to fly away on too.

A flurry of movement snapped her gaze back down. She had just enough time to witness the officer push Omar backwards. The stunned archaeologist hadn't expected the assault, and he managed an indignant, "*hey!*" before a gun was pulled, and four shots rang out.

A baggy floral shirt quivered, and four crimson blotches bloomed against Omar's back like red roses. Time froze and Zahra sat forward, fingers gripping the dashboard, eyes sharpened in alarm.

"*Omar!*"

The single-worded scream erupted from her mouth without warning as Omar crumpled to the ground in a heap. As though alerted of her existence for the first time, the police officer adjusted his aim and fired again. The pickup's windshield shattered as Zahra ducked down, glass raining onto the back of her head. Heavy thunks struck the engine block as her terrified fingers reached across the steering column to fumble with Omar's key, still lodged in the ignition. Grasping past its lucky eight ball keyring, she turned it, and immediately heard the hot engine burst into life.

As quickly as it had come on, the gunfire stopped, and she raised her head level with the shattered windshield to see the officer walking towards her, skirting Omar's body. An empty clip fell from his gun only to be replaced with a fresh one.

Steeling her nerves, Zahra twisted her lower body to press down on the clutch. Ramming the gear stick into first, she put her foot to the floor. At once the pickup lurched forward and threatened to stall until she managed to feather the worn clutch plates. Spread across both seats, she had no idea in what direction she was driving, only that the engine was blaring at her on the rev limiter. More gunshots struck the side, and an impact sent her crashing headfirst into the dash. Stars flew before her eyes even as she held her foot to the floor, determined to get through the roadblock.

You're still moving, she told herself as she looked out a cracked window to see the tips of hills moving past. *You're getting away*. Sliding herself into the driver's seat, she felt a warm trickle skirt her eye socket, and she risked a look through the rear mirror, its scented tree bobbing wildly.

Grey smoke was curling from the police car's mangled hood. The heavy pickup had crashed straight into it on the way past. Omar still lay on the ground where he'd fallen, motionless. Shifting up into second, Zahra saw muzzle flashes fill the mirror, and the rear window shattered as more metallic thunks struck the truck's rear. A searing heat lanced through her flank as though she'd been speared with a red hot poker, and she grasped her side with a grunt, feeling warm blood welling underneath her palm. *I've been shot*.

The shock sent a new fear through her bones. Driving one-handed, she began to cry in grief and terror, shifting up into third and passing a sign warning of fresh danger ahead from falling rocks. Following a long, sweeping corner, she left utter chaos in her wake, and the horrific sight she'd left behind was swallowed up by the arid hills, wiped clean on desert winds.

Amman, Capital City of Jordan

A set of large, dark wood double doors opened on greased hinges, and a man wearing traditional *dishdasha* robes glided inside the opulent surroundings with the assured zeal of someone well-used to their own authority. The robes' white collar and cuffs were starched stiff, immaculate sleeves freshly pressed. Covering him down to his eyebrows was a red-chequered *ghutra* headcloth, capped with a double-coiled *agal*.

Though he was rapidly approaching fifty, Haifa Al-Hawari could have easily passed for someone in his forties, perhaps even late thirties. A neatly-trimmed beard carried no hint of grey, and his slender, manicured fingers were soft as velvet. An easy smile, uncaring for the trivialities of modern life, adorned plump skin made smooth by regular visits to the Turkish baths. An expensive but understated watch dug into a reddened wrist, as though the delicate skin could barely endure its weight.

Pausing in the middle of the open space, Al-Hawari waited for the resounding clunk of the doors at his back before taking a deep inhale of fragrant air. *Jasmine*. The easy smile turned to one of sadness as he continued his glide further through the palatial room. His slippered feet barely made a sound on the marble tiles as he passed rough stone statues of dead gods. A few were life size, but most were imprisoned in mahogany display cabinets. Breezing past without so much as a glance, he took a straight route to the most unlikely of appliances

anyone would have expected to find inside such a treasure room; a domestic microwave. It stood on a small side table, devoid of any electric cable. Popping open its mesh door, Al-Hawari noted a couple of mobile phones already placed inside. One was badly scuffed as though it had been thrown in a fury, the cartoon bear on its back cover badly scratched.

Placing his own phone on top, he shut the cheap plastic hatch and stepped through rippling curtains to an outside terrace where he drank in the scenery at a balcony rail. The evening's sun was casting long shadows over Jordan's capital city, softening its rough edges like fine sandpaper. Gazing down into his walled compound, Al-Hawari observed two gardeners packing up after an afternoon spent tidying the government building's ornamental garden with its date palm trees. The neatened plants now swayed in appreciation on a warm gust of wind. The most recent weather forecast had predicted a much stronger breeze from the south tomorrow, bringing the sands of Arabia with it. *There will be a blood red sun in the morning*, Al-Hawari told himself. Whether it be a good or bad omen, only time would tell.

Lifting his gaze over the rooftops of this most exclusive of streets, he followed the distant call of a Muezzin with his eyes. The guttural, almost forlorn voice was calling the faithful masses to evening prayers from the pencil-thin spire of a minaret. Loudspeakers had long replaced the traditional figure on the tower's balcony, now left to rust. They were a technological progress Al-Hawari despised; there was something vulgar in using such ugly, static-sounding technology to convey this most elegant of artforms.

The evening's heat was bringing the first throbs of a headache behind his eyes. The emergency cabinet meeting he'd just left had been one long mental obstacle course, and another was scheduled within half an hour. Smacking his lips, Al-Hawari turned his back on the view and closed the glass door behind himself, instantly muffling the melodious cries.

A sweating jug of rosewater called out to him from a nearby drinks cabinet, and walking beneath the sails of a beating ceiling fan, he grasped its slippery handle to pour himself a tall glass. Only when he sat down on an elegant couch did he acknowledge his waiting guest for the first time. "I am told you've refused medical treatment." His voice was smooth as honey, and just as sickly. Taking a long draught of the fragrant water, he placed his glass down and dabbed his lips with the corner of a napkin.

His guest shifted in her own couch on the opposite side of a Persian rug. Her glass of water remained untouched on a low coffee table. "Scratches, nothing more," she replied in a sullen air. A black, flowing abaya covered her slender figure down to her ankles, its yellow embroidery acting as a nice individualistic touch. A headscarf that had covered her face on entering the complex was now loose around her neck, revealing red hair held in a messy updo. Her pale, freckled features were peppered with clotted cuts down one side, and a dark smudge was making itself known beneath her left eye.

"It is surprising how easily a small scratch can become infected," Al-Hawari replied. "Isn't that what killed another archaeologist; Howard Carter?"

His guest shook her head and immediately winced from a bite of whiplash. "That was George Herbert. And it was a mosquito bite."

"And some say it was an ancient Egyptian curse." Al-Hawari's thin smile grew teeth. "Either way, get your injuries seen to. And drink some water, Talia."

"Why?"

“Because I’m telling you.” He raised his own drink and waited for her to do the same. By the time both glasses clacked on their coasters, his had barely altered, while hers was emptied. “Now tell me what happened,” he said, wiping a wetted palm on his cloth napkin.

“They escaped,” Talia replied with a shrug. “I was too impetuous. I thought I could bring them in alive...” She briefly closed her eyes, veiling ocean-blue orbs from the world. *There’s a whole universe behind those eyes*, Al-Hawari thought to himself as he watched them reappear. While Talia continued with her excuses, he checked his watch, allowing himself five minutes for this meeting. Any more, and his absence would be noticed. “...once the tablet was found, it all happened so fast. If she hadn’t gone for her phone, I would have been able to secure the site.”

“I take it one of those belong to her?” He nodded to the microwave and received the slightest of affirmations in return. “And you are certain no photograph got out?”

She hesitated. “I-I think so.”

Al-Hawari sat back, imagining the young woman before him being capable of executing two soldiers in cold blood. It wasn’t easy to do, but then neither was anything else these days. His head was itching beneath the coarse ghutrah, and he wanted to tear off the material to give his scalp a good scratch. *But God teaches us restraint.*

“What happened today at Petra was a senseless act of terrorism targeting Western tourists, nothing more,” he announced, glancing out the window at an orange haze settling upon the city. “All day, the Prime Minister has been receiving messages of support from World leaders. Even Israel has publicly offered their assistance.” He made a faint snort as though he’d been told a bad joke. “Exact details of the attack are still to be confirmed. What we *do* know is one of the attackers, a Dr Omar Faraj, was killed attempting to escape. When security services broke into his apartment two hours ago, they found extremist materials and bomb-making equipment in his bedroom. Email correspondence taken from a hard drive indicates he was being radicalised by outside forces over the last twelve months at least.” He let his words sink in, knowing every single one of them was a lie. He’d been lucky to get the fake evidence planted in the archaeologist’s home before the usual goons from Jordan’s General Intelligence Directorate had battered down the door. “Tomorrow morning, our fighter planes will bomb a disused training camp in a show of strength for the television cameras, and within a week, Petra will reopen to the public.” He paused to rotate his glass on its coaster, sharp, soulless eyes never leaving the soft blues of his guest. “And the World turns, Talia.”

“But Zahra Gamil is still out there. I’ve heard the pickup truck was found abandoned in Hashemeyeh. If she’s heading north, she might-”

“Dr Gamil is none of your concern,” Al-Hawari declared. “We had a deal, did we not? As the archaeologist, you confirm and secure the discoveries, and my men perform the necessary disposal.” The first hint of displeasure crossed his delicate features. “You messed up, as the Americans like to say.”

“It won’t happen again.”

“That’s right, it won’t.” He went to say something else but changed course at the last moment. “This is what is going to happen, Talia. You are going straight to the Institute from here, and you are going to decipher that Byzantine tablet. Or what parts of it you can piece together. If it gives clues to the whereabouts of the heretical text, we must be the ones to find it first.”

“And Zahra?”

“I am going to do all I can to keep her name away from those idiots in the Defence Ministry. Until all the bodies are identified, as far as they’re concerned, she fell victim to the attack. That should give us the time we need to track her down before this mess can spread onto a clean floor.” Rising to his feet, he adjusted a cuff over his watch and glided towards the microwave. “Our enemies are searching for weaknesses every second of every day. We must be vigilant. We must protect our eternal truths, as they have protected us.” His hand hovered over the release button as a thought struck him. “Oh, and it may interest you to know that Louise Mayer died in the attack. Her parents will be notified, and we expect they’ll want to see the body.” An apologetic smile crossed his lips, and Talia swallowed. “Of course, they will be advised against it, seeing how her face is unrecognisable. And the unfortunate burns to her hands make fingerprinting impossible. It’s a good thing she decided to get a tattoo before obtaining her placement at Petra, otherwise her family might never have had closure.”

Lifting the hem of her abaya a fraction, Talia glanced at a rabbit tattoo on the inside of her ankle. *There’s no way back now*, she thought, then instantly corrected herself. *There was no way back the moment I shook Zahra’s hand on my first day.*

“The woman known as Louise may be dead, Talia,” Al-Hawari continued. “But if you force me to lie to my Prime Minister again, you will discover how a person can die twice.”

The microwave door was jabbed open, and the government minister retrieved two phones. Pocketing one with a cartoon bear, he checked his own and felt it vibrate in his palm as it reconnected with the outside world. *Five missed calls already.* Without another word, he clapped the microwave closed and marched out the room, double doors opening for him as though by silent command.

Aqaba, Jordan

Swinging her legs to and fro over the edge of a hospital bed, Zahra watched the manic buzzing of a fly bob around a fluorescent bug zapper bolted high on the wall. The insect weaved and ducked ever closer to the electrified bars until it touched with an audible pop, fusing its chitin body to a crisp.

A drawer was rattled shut, and a syringe was filled from a small glass vial. “What is that?” she asked the female doctor drawing back a plunger.

“Antibiotics. In case of infection,” the doctor replied, ejecting a couple of air bubbles. She went over to her patient whose top was raised to expose her midriff. A hole in her flank had been sewn shut, leaving a bloodstain down the waistband of her shorts. “You sure this was caused by a car crash?” The question was accompanied by the needle’s sharp tip as the drug was injected close to the wound.

Zahra grunted and looked away. She’d long developed a hatred of needles. “Yes.”

“What did you crash into? A hail of bullets?”

The used syringe was tossed into a yellow plastic waste bin, and Zahra instinctively glanced at a metal kidney dish where a bullet fragment lay inside. It had been drawn out from her

flesh to the sound of coarse expletives growled in English. “It felt more like a brick wall,” she muttered, rolling down her soiled top to cover old scars crisscrossing her back.

After escaping the roadblock, she had driven without thought or purpose for mile after mile, her nerves stripped raw after re-living Omar’s killing in her head. Eventually, she realised she’d been heading east through arid scrubland, and the gruff engine had begun to smoke by the time she’d pulled into a nondescript sidestreet in a small, out of the way town called Hashemeyeh. The radiator had been shot straight through, leaking its coolant in long drips on the road. Taking Omar’s coat from a back seat, she’d climbed out of the riddled truck, leaving everything else behind. She’d thought of taking his wallet from the dashboard with the intention of handing it to his family. But being caught with it would only cause her more problems. So removing a small wad of notes, she’d stuffed them in her pocket and limped away for the nearest bus station.

“You’ll need to visit a medical centre in seven days to have your stitches taken out,” the doctor said over the top of a clipboard. “Try to keep the wound dry in the meantime, and watch for any signs of infection. If it gets hot or begins to ooze, come straight back.” She finished some scribbles and handed over a medical form for Zahra to sign.

“I can’t come back here,” Zahra muttered, scratching with the pen nib.

“Then I suggest you find another doctor in the near future.”

The form was added to a pile and the medic began tidying the examination room ready for her next patient. It was past midnight, and the usual surge of patients had already begun.

“Is that it?” Zahra asked, reaching for Omar’s coat with a wince. The stitches were already making themselves known, pulling her skin like a set of tight overalls.

The doctor shrugged as bloodied swabs were dropped into a bin. “Unless you have another injury you haven’t told me about?”

None you can help me with, Zahra thought as she struggled into cold sleeves. She watched the doctor turn her back for the door, and a sudden, crushing loneliness washed over her. It was like an anxiety attack.

“Uh... Can I stay here? For tonight?”

She blushed at her own blurted question, yet she had nowhere else to seek refuge. She couldn’t go to her rented flat, and after her experience of Louise and the police officer, there was no-one in Jordan she could trust. She truly was alone.

“This is a walk-in centre. We can’t spare any beds for sleepovers,” the doctor said bluntly. Seeing Zahra’s crestfallen nod of acceptance, she passed a hand down her tired face. “But we may have a chair you can use, just for tonight.”

Relief flooded through the desperate woman, and she slid off the bed. She could have hugged the doctor right there. “Is there a telephone I can use?” she numbly asked instead.

“There’s a payphone by reception.”

“Thank you.”

Leaving the examination room, she walked down a corridor to reception. The waiting area was filling up as people shuffled inside from the night, and each one had to blink from the sterile glare of white fluorescent ceiling lights. To Zahra, it was clear many of the injured had been assaulted. One man was being ushered inside by a bored-looking police officer. His wrists were cuffed at his back, the collar of his T-shirt stretched all out of shape. Blood drops were spattered down his front from a nasty cut across his forehead.

Making eye contact with the officer, Zahra hurried to a payphone in the corner where she fumbled to pick up the receiver. Catching her reflection in a mirror, she gasped at what she saw. The self-assured archaeologist her male peers called Cleopatra was gone. In her place was a dishevelled, exhausted wreck of a woman. Dark rings surrounded sunken eyes, her hair having been seemingly wrenched from its ponytail by distraught hands. Its strands now framed her pale face like some garish wig.

Slotting coins one after another, she began dialling a number from memory. The alien beeping of an international line rang in her ear as she prayed for the person on the other end to pick up. Risking a look through reception, she checked the police officer wasn't showing any interest in her, then turned back to the phone, ignoring crude graffiti scratched into its paintwork. She needed time to gather her thoughts, and she needed a long, hot shower. But first she had to get to safety, and that meant getting out of Jordan. Only then could she even contemplate what to do next.

"Please pick up, please," she quietly begged, cupping a hand over her mouth. The line clicked, and an emotionless voicemail instruction sent her heart to her feet. Steadying her breathing, she waited for the inevitable beep, then spoke in as calm a voice as she could. "Bijou, it's Zahra. I need your help."