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THE SCIMITAR OF YUSUF

A Novel

by

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PHANTOM SCIMITAR

I was not the only passenger aboard the *MS Khedive Star* who noticed the disturbance, or wondered what it might mean.

A fair number of new passengers were joining the ship at Port Said, and I had been at the rail since before the gangway went down, watching with the particular detachment of a man who has spent three weeks writing about crimes that rarely make the news in any direct sense, but leave absences in the world: missing artefacts, cancelled provenances, objects whose ownership cannot quite be traced back to the ground from which they came. I had been in Egypt on assignment for *The Meridian*, a digital current affairs magazine, and had been sketching notes for a podcast episode I was not yet certain I would make. Either way, I was ready to come home.

What a crowd it was. The characteristic mixture of the Eastern Mediterranean port of call: dock workers in high-visibility vests alongside men in pale linen suits, a customs official with a tablet arguing with someone in a silver SUV, negotiations being conducted simultaneously in three languages with every appearance of good will on all sides. Only the sky was clean; that hard, impartial sunlight that spares nothing and defies any romantic notion of the picturesque. I was in that kind of mood.

I turned to the man beside me at the rail. Ahmad Nadeem and I had been introduced at dinner two evenings out of Alexandria

and had found each other's company agreeable in the way that sea travel occasionally produces—a friendship of convenience that sometimes, unexpectedly, becomes the real thing. He was a Jordanian academic, lean and precise, with a close-cropped grey beard kept with the care of someone who pays attention to details. His field was the provenance of pre-Islamic artefacts; he had been at a conference in Cairo and was travelling back to London, where he held a visiting fellowship at the British Institute.

"There is a kind of tension down there," I said. "Subdued. Everyone seems to be reacting to something."

Nadeem smiled. "Probably," he replied, "some person of consequence is boarding."

"Any idea who?"

A small group of men in traditional dress passed along the deck behind us—several wore the green-banded turbans of those who have completed the pilgrimage to Mecca. Nadeem appeared not to have heard the question.

The disturbance below—which was less a sound than a quality of collective attentiveness, a stillness underneath the general noise of the dock—intensified briefly, then simply ceased. It was only in its absence that one realised how marked it had been: that barely perceptible murmuring one encounters in certain markets when someone of significance has passed through, unremarked by most but felt by all.

Then it happened.

A scream—sharp, sudden, physical—dropping within a second to a groan that faded into the noise of the harbour.

I was moving before I had decided to. There was a general press of bodies; through it, two crewmen carried a third man between them. Behind them, ascending the gangway with a worn brown leather carry-on over one shoulder, came a compact figure of about sixty, sun-darkened with decades of fieldwork. He did not look back.

"What has happened?"

"One of the dock workers—"

"Someone has been attacked—"

"Stand back, please."

The senior officer who appeared at the top of the gangway moved everyone back with the flat authority of a man who manages crises in small spaces. The injured man was carried through.

Nadeem had materialised at my elbow.

"A port worker," he said quietly. "Poor devil." His expression was not easy to read.

I had seen a good deal in my years of covering stories that resist any neat category. But what I had seen in the brief moment before the officer cleared the area stayed with me with a precision that is the particular property of violent shock.

The man's right hand had been severed at the wrist.

No one could explain how. No one had witnessed the act itself. No one could say what had become of the hand.

A journalist's instinct is to find the proximate cause, and the proximate cause was the man who had just boarded. A word with

one of the bar stewards confirmed what I had already begun to suppose.

"That would be Professor Marchmont, sir. The injured man had been carrying some of his luggage."

The name was familiar to me. Edward Marchmont was a scholar of some distinction—archaeology primarily, with a specialism in the Islamic Near East that had taken him considerably further afield than most academics care to go. I had reviewed his most recent book for a podcast episode on the modern antiquities trade and found it brilliant and, in two or three chapters, oddly reticent in a manner I had noticed at the time and not since resolved.

I found him on the sun deck an hour later, once we had cleared the harbour and the city had retreated into its characteristic haze. He was reading—a physical book, a detail I registered without quite knowing why—and he received my introduction with the polite wariness of a man accustomed to journalists.

"I couldn't see what happened," he said. "The man was directly behind me. I had just taken one bag from his hand; he was carrying another, the heavier one." He set his book face-down on the arm of the chair. "It was a clean cut. I have seen injuries of that kind. In the field."

I waited.

"It is very like the wound produced by a scimitar," he said. "The punishment Yusuf's fraternity claims for theft." He paused. "Not that the man was a thief, as far as I am aware."

He picked up his book again with the quiet finality of a man who has said what he intended to say. But what was left unspoken in the last sentence was plain enough: that the penalty might have been intended for someone else, and that someone else was him.

In conversation with Mr. Lockhart, the *Khedive Star's* first officer, I learned what little was known of our other unusually private fellow passengers. Lockhart was a compact Scotsman with an engineering degree and a structural aversion to embroidering what he knew.

"There is a private party in the lower-deck cabins," he told me, over coffee that afternoon. "Private catering arrangements, prefer not to be disturbed. The contact name listed is a Mr. Azraeel. Not his full name, I would think."

"Have you seen him?"

"No. A few of the party—the ones who move about. They are quiet. Very efficient." He wrapped both hands around his mug. "The crew have been behaving oddly since Port Said, Mr. Brennan."

"Oddly how?"

"There is a sound from the lower decks at night. Low. Rhythmic. I do not know the source of it." He looked at me with the expression of a man who has decided to say rather more than he normally would. "I shall be glad when we reach Tilbury. I will leave it at that."

The following night, someone tried to open the door of Professor Marchmont's cabin.

He reported it the next morning without apparent alarm, which was itself alarming. He had been inside, the door locked as he always kept it. He had heard a sound—not forceful, not hurried—the careful, methodical testing of a lock by someone who understood locks. He had waited ten seconds, then opened the door. The corridor was empty.

It was at dinner two nights later that he told me about the light.

"You will think I have been in the field too long," he said.

"Try me."

"In my berth, in the dark—perhaps two hours after midnight. I saw a shape on the wall. A reflection, I assume; the porthole was uncurtained and there was moonlight. But it was very sharply defined." He reached for his glass. "Like the blade of a scimitar. It has appeared to me twice now."

He said it quickly, as if the speed of delivery made it more rational. I do not think it did.

Lockhart came to find me before breakfast on the morning of our ninth day out from Port Said.

"I want to tell you something," he said. We walked to a quiet section of the deck. "Last night, on my rounds, I was on the forward deck near the bow containers. I saw something moving along the rail." He stopped and looked at me with the directness of a man who has decided to stop being embarrassed by what he is about to say. "It was not upright. It was low, and fast, and it was not moving the way a person moves."

He offered no further description. He did not need to. The plainness of his account, from a man constitutionally disinclined to elaborate, was more unsettling than any elaboration would have been.

We arrived at Tilbury sixteen days after leaving Port Said.

The private group from the lower-deck cabins disembarked in a body, moving with the quiet efficiency of people who had rehearsed the arrangement. They formed a compact screen of bodies around a central figure I was unable to make out—something tall, robed, distinguished in bearing, but I had no more than an impression. I had positioned myself to observe. This was, I think, apparent to anyone paying attention, and no one looked at me.

Nadeem was standing near the top of the gangway. Something passed from one of the departing group to his hand as they moved past him—I could not say what; it was brief and smooth and over before I was quite certain I had seen it. He started, slightly, as a man starts when he receives news he has been half-expecting but has not quite prepared himself for. He turned away without looking in my direction.

I was collecting my documents at the disembarkation desk when the sound reached me: from somewhere below, near the stairwell leading to the lower cabins, a high and ragged cry that rose once and stopped.

By the time I reached it, three other passengers were already there.

A member of the cabin crew lay at the foot of the stairs.
His right hand had been severed above the wrist.

The ship was still in dock. There was nowhere to go, and not
a soul aboard could account for what had happened.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GIRL WITH THE VIOLET EYES

The events of the voyage home occupied my mind more than I cared to admit during the days that followed. I had filed my piece on the antiquities trade for *The Meridian* and had made a start on the podcast episode that had been resisting shape since Cairo. But the injured dock worker at Port Said, and the crewman's severed hand at Tilbury, kept presenting themselves at inconvenient moments—not as material, but as something that more closely resembled personal apprehension.

Scotland Yard's marine division had issued a brief statement confirming that the Tilbury incident was under investigation. No arrest had been made and no further information was available. I had heard nothing from Professor Marchmont since the ship. I had heard nothing from Ahmad Nadeem, which I found I minded less—and minding it less troubled me more than the silence itself.

It was an evening in early November when the next thing happened. I had been at my desk for several hours in the flat that serves me as both home and office, which occupies the upper floor of a Georgian terrace off a courtyard behind Fleet Street. It is quiet for its neighbourhood, which is its principal recommendation. I had put a second kettle on and was re-reading a paragraph I had written four times when a faint sound from the direction of the front door stopped me.

Something had been pushed through the letter box.

I thought little of it. Then the doorbell rang.

I went to the door. On the mat lay a small envelope—oblong, of an unusual colour I could only describe as pale amethyst—addressed in a careful, even hand I did not recognise. My name only: *Mr. Brennan*.

I looked at it for a moment longer than was necessary. Then I tore it open.

The contents were a single folded sheet of the same amethyst paper. I read three lines, glanced up, and went at once to the door.

Nobody on the landing. I leaned over the stairwell rail and looked down into the hall below.

A white-coated figure was crossing the entrance hall towards the street door.

I went down two steps at a time, without stopping for a coat, and came out into the courtyard. Under the archway at the far end I caught a glimpse of white. Beyond it, the street.

I ran.

Just where the passage opened onto the pavement—almost in the current of the street—I overtook her. She turned, briefly and unwillingly. A long pale coat, a silk scarf drawn across the lower part of her face, and above the scarf, for a single unguarded instant, a pair of eyes of a colour I had not encountered before. Not blue, not grey. A deep and genuine violet, oddly luminous, that reminded me of nothing so much as deep water over a pale bed.

"Please do not detain me." Her voice was low and composed. She was not, I noticed, afraid of me. She was afraid of something

behind me or to the side of me, and the distinction seemed important.

"You have pushed a note through my letter box," I said. "You owe me at least an explanation."

"I owe you precisely nothing of the kind. I am asking you to let me go."

Past the end of the passage the street moved and flowed indifferently, full of people going home in the dark. I had the distinct feeling that I was standing at the edge of something very much larger than what I could currently see.

"Who are you?" I said.

"That is exactly what I cannot tell you."

"Then tell me something you can."

She was silent for a moment, and in that moment she lowered the scarf from her face entirely. She was young—not much more than twenty-five, perhaps—with dark hair swept back from a pale brow, and those extraordinary eyes, and a quality of absolute composure that seemed inconsistent with the urgency of her errand. She studied me as if arriving at a decision she had already made.

"Promise me," she said, "that you will tell no one about this visit. Not the police. Not anyone."

"That depends on what is in the note."

"You have read it. Will you promise or not?"

I cannot account, entirely, for why I did. There was no charm deployed, no distress performed. She was simply direct in a

way that I found unexpectedly difficult to resist. "I promise," I said.

Something shifted in her expression—not relief, but the slight easing of a pressure that had been there a long time.

"Then please act on what it says," she said. "Please act on it tonight. There is very little time."

She drew the scarf back across her face and walked away. I watched her until the foot traffic of the street closed around her. I was about to follow at a distance when a bus pulled in and blocked the view; and when it moved again, she was gone—and so was the man who had stepped from the shadow of a doorway on the far side to fall into step beside her.

I cannot be certain it was Ahmad Nadeem. I was almost certain it was Ahmad Nadeem.

I went upstairs and sat down with the note under the lamp. It was written on a sheet of the same pale amethyst paper, in the same careful square hand:

Prevail upon Professor Marchmont to place what he has in the brown case in the porch of his house tonight. If he fails to do so, no power on earth can save him from the Scimitar of Yusuf.

A Friend.

I read it twice. Then I found Professor Marchmont's number and rang him.

CHAPTER THREE

"YUSUF OF ALEPPO"

Professor Marchmont answered immediately.

"Strange that you should ring," he said. "I was about to ring you."

"Before anything else," I said, "let me read you something. An anonymous communication I received this evening."

'I had not forgotten my promise, and said nothing of its origin.'

"I take it you know what it means."

"I know very well what it means, Brennan." There was a pause that I found difficult to interpret. "You will recall the crescent of light I described to you on the ship—the shape that appeared on the wall of my stateroom in the dark. It appeared again tonight. Not half an hour ago."

I waited.

"I have not been honest with you," he said. "I have not been honest with myself, which is the worse of the two offences. Since I appear to be running short of time for either, let me be honest now."

He spoke for nearly twenty minutes. His voice had the flat, exhausted quality of a man reciting something he has turned over many times in private and can no longer improve.

In the spring of the previous year, he told me, he had been one of a small academic delegation—formally constituted, operating under strict conditions of confidentiality—granted

exceptional access to view a private collection of Islamic heritage objects held at a site in the Near East that he declined to name. The terms of the access were unambiguous: documentation and scholarly observation only, nothing to be removed, nothing to be photographed without the specific consent of the collection's custodians. He had behaved correctly throughout the delegation's two-day visit, until the morning of the last day, when he had not.

"I took one of the objects," he said. "A slipper. Ancient moroccan leather, probably twelfth century, of no material value whatsoever. Its significance is entirely religious. It is revered by a very great many Muslims as one of the slippers worn by the Prophet Muhammad."

He paused.

"It is," he continued, "precisely the category of object one must never touch, much less remove. I had known that before I ever set foot in the room where it was kept. I removed it anyway."

"Why?"

There was a silence of genuine length. "Because I am a scholar who wanted to possess a thing he should only have looked at," he said. "It is not an unfamiliar story, Brennan. The British Museum is full of the same story. It does not become less banal for having cost this much."

I said nothing.

He continued. The organisation he called the Hashishin—a name taken from a medieval sect of the same name, founded in

Khorassan in 1090, long since dissolved but whose mythology had been carefully preserved and claimed by the group now operating under it—was watching the collection. The modern Hashishin were not a surviving medieval order in any simple historical sense, but a self-invented fraternity using the old name, symbols, and punishments for its own purposes. It would be a grave error, Marchmont said, to confuse Yusuf's fraternity with Islam itself; most Muslim scholars and custodians who knew of them regarded them not as defenders of the faith, but as men who had turned reverence into private law. They knew of the theft almost immediately. Their present leader, known in the circles that knew of him at all as Yusuf of Aleppo, was the self-appointed guardian of certain sacred Islamic heritage objects, and had constituted himself judge and executor in matters relating to their recovery, operating outside every legal framework and answerable to nothing he recognised as legitimate authority. He was, Marchmont said quietly, not a man to be understood through any ordinary frame of reference.

"The severed hands," I said. "Port Said. Tilbury."

"Their penalty," Marchmont said. "What they call their penalty, visited upon any outsider who touches the receptacle in which the slipper is carried. The people who suffered had no idea what they were handling. The Hashishin do not distinguish between the guilty and the incidental."

"And you were untouched on the voyage."

"I have spent a great deal of my working life among Muslim scholars. I am known in certain quarters as a sympathetic

outsider, not a Muslim, but that was sufficient to make them uncertain. And they preferred not to risk the slipper being lost permanently before they had recovered it. They preferred to wait."

"And now they are not waiting."

"The note you received is a final offer," he said. "A clean resolution on their terms. If the slipper is not placed in the porch of my house tonight, I believe they will come for it. And I believe they will no longer be careful about what else happens."

I looked at the note lying on my desk. *No power on earth can save him from the Scimitar of Yusuf.*

"In the event that matters do not resolve themselves well," Marchmont said, his voice very level now, "you should know the following. The slipper is in the safe in my study here in Dulwich. The key to the safe, together with a letter containing the full particulars of this affair and the lock combination, is hidden behind my copy of *Assyrian Mythology* in the smaller of my two bookcases. You will see it at once. I am not asking you to open the safe. I am telling you this because if something happens to me, someone outside all of this should know where things stand."

"Why me?"

"Because I began on the ship by not quite telling you the truth," he said, "and now this woman has brought the matter to your door. I am sorry for that. I am genuinely sorry, Brennan."

We spoke for a little longer. With every exchange I was more convinced that the threat against him was not the kind that would

be deterred by a police car in the road outside his house. When I set down the phone I sat for a moment, then acted on a determination that felt more like instinct than calculation: I called Inspector Renshaw.

I had known Renshaw for some years—we had been useful to each other on two or three cases where journalism and police work ran close together. He was with the Metropolitan Police, a detective inspector of the kind that carries genuine seniority without much visible ceremony, and he picked up on the second ring. A few sentences were enough to interest him. He said he would come immediately; within thirty minutes he was in the chair across from my desk with a glass of Scotch he had accepted without comment, listening with the expression he wears when he has decided something is serious but has not yet decided what to do about it.

He had just begun to ask his second question when my phone lit with Marchmont's name.

I answered at once.

"Hullo—Brennan—is that Brennan?"

"Yes. What is it? What is happening there?"

"I rang to say—" His voice was taut, controlled, and then between one word and the next it changed. Something came through the line from behind him—not one sound but several at once, the acoustic signature of a room suddenly in violent disorder. A crash. Something falling. Voices I could not resolve into words.

"Hullo!" I said. "Hullo—Marchmont!"

Renshaw was already on his feet.

The line went quiet. Not dead—the connection was still open—but quiet in the way that rooms are quiet after something has happened that cannot be undone. Renshaw stood watching my face with an expression I had not seen on it before.

Then, from a great distance, barely there at all—the residue of an open line, or the last effort of a voice that had very nearly nothing left:

“Yusuf of Aleppo,” it said. “Yusuf...of Aleppo...”

CHAPTER FOUR
THE OBLONG BOX

Renshaw was already reaching for his jacket.

"Ring them," I said. "Ring Dulwich."

"I'm ringing them." He had his phone to his ear before I had finished the sentence. He spoke briefly, listened, and put the phone away with the expression of a man setting aside something he would rather not carry. "A car went when Marchmont called in earlier this evening," he said. "They found the front door locked. No response. They're there now."

We were in a taxi inside two minutes and on the Dulwich road within ten. I sat with my phone in my hand and Marchmont's name still on the screen and said very little. Renshaw looked straight ahead. Outside, the city moved past in the familiar way that becomes strange when you are going somewhere you do not want to reach.

The house, when we arrived, had the quality of stillness that Renshaw and I recognised without needing to name it. A uniformed officer stood at the iron gate set in a low brick wall; a second car was parked at an angle on the verge. Under the nearest streetlamp a plain-clothes man came forward to meet us as we came through the gate.

Renshaw looked at his face.

"Dead," Renshaw said. It was not a question.

"Yes, sir. We found him when we forced the study door about forty minutes ago." The officer glanced at me, then back to

Renshaw. "I have been doing this job for eighteen years and I have never seen anything quite like it, sir. To be straightforward with you."

We went up the path between overgrown front borders—the place had the air of a house whose owner had not been attending to practical matters for some time. The study was at the back of the ground floor off a short corridor, and its door had been put in from its frame.

Inside, a lamp on the littered desk had been left burning. The room had been searched—or rather, it had been experienced by something that had moved through it with considerable force and no concern for what it disturbed. Books swept from shelves. Papers across the floor. A chair overturned. A laptop with its screen cracked. In the corner, a small safe, brass-knobbed and closed.

I will not attempt to describe what lay beneath the table. I will say only that Renshaw stood looking at it for a long moment with his jaw set, and that the officer beside us, who had already seen it once, looked away.

"The door," Renshaw said finally. "Key on the inside when you came in?"

"Yes, sir. In the lock on the inside face."

"Windows?"

"Both latched from within. The glazing is intact on both."

Renshaw crouched and examined the near window without touching it, then turned. "Who found him?"

"His housekeeper, a Mrs. Potts—comes in three mornings a week, lives half a mile up the road. She came back from a grocery errand at around half nine, saw lights on, couldn't get any answer. She's outside now."

"Anyone inside the room when you broke the door down?"

"No one and nothing, sir." The man said it with the flatness of someone who knew how it sounded. "I would stake my pension on it."

"Nothing moved since?"

"Only him, for the surgeon. Nothing else has been touched."

Renshaw stood with his hands in his pockets looking slowly around the room. His eye stopped on something near the foot of the desk that I had not until then registered: a flat-headed screwdriver lying on the floor close to an oblong wooden crate that sat against the wall between the overturned chair and the window.

"This box," he said. "When did it arrive?"

It was solidly constructed—a custom piece, not commercial packaging, made from good timber and braced with metal strapping. Something between a shipping case and a cabinet, about a metre long, addressed to Professor Marchmont in a printed label. The screwdriver lay near one of the long edges of the lid, where someone had been working at the joint.

"Mrs. Potts says a courier brought it this afternoon," the officer said. "She doesn't know if the professor answered the door himself."

"He was trying to open it when it happened," I said.

Renshaw tried the lid. It did not move. He worked his fingers along the edges, applied pressure at various points, found nothing that gave. He looked at me, then at the officer. "Something heavier."

A garden fork was found in the lean-to at the side of the house. Renshaw applied it with the deliberate, systematic force of a man who is not in a hurry because he already suspects what he will find, and eventually the crate gave with a sound that I found I had been dreading without knowing why.

Inside, fitted into a purpose-built channel in the base of the crate as precisely as an instrument in its case, lay a blade. Crescent-shaped. The design was the kind one might have called decorative, in different circumstances. It was not, in the present circumstances, decorative. It was wet.

"God in heaven," said the officer at my shoulder.

Renshaw straightened and stood looking at it without touching it.

"A box trick," he said, very quietly. "The kind stage conjurors use. The lid can only be operated from the inside." He looked at me. "Something was in here when it was delivered. Patient as you like. Waiting for him to try to open it. The more he worked at the lid from outside, the more the mechanism engaged from within. Once he had triggered it—" He stopped. "And then when the police knocked the door down, it was back in the box. Lid closed. And completely empty, to any eye that wasn't looking for a hidden base."

The room had acquired a quality of silence that made me very conscious of the lamp burning on the desk, and of all the dark outside the window.

"Mr. Brennan," said Renshaw. "The bookcase."

I found the smaller of the two bookcases against the east wall and ran my eye along the spines. *Assyrian Mythology* was third from the left on the middle shelf. I drew it out. Behind it, exactly as Marchmont had described less than two hours ago in the last coherent conversation I would ever have with him, lay a brown envelope. My name was on it in his hand.

I gave it to Renshaw without opening it. He carried it to the lamp, slit it carefully, and emptied out a key on a short chain and a folded letter.

He read standing up, in silence. I watched his face and knew from what it did at certain points that the letter went somewhat further than the phone call had done—that there were details here Marchmont had chosen not to speak aloud, details about the organization, about Yusuf of Aleppo, about the particular history of the slipper and the precise combination of the safe. When he had finished he folded it and held it for a moment.

"He says not to open the case inside the safe," he said.

"I know. He said the same on the phone."

Renshaw looked at me steadily. "How much did he tell you?"

"Most of it."

"Then you know what we are dealing with."

"I know what he believed we are dealing with."

Renshaw nodded slowly, as if he found the distinction less useful than I did. He put the letter in his inside pocket and turned towards the safe with the key in his hand and an expression I had not seen on his face before—the expression, I thought, of a man who is about to do something he is professionally required to do and personally very reluctant to.

A long silence settled over the room: over the lamp, and the broken box, and the crescent blade, and what remained of Edward Marchmont beneath his desk. Then Renshaw crouched before the safe and began to work the combination.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE OCCUPANT OF THE BOX

It was past one in the morning when I sat down with *Assyrian Mythology* open on the desk before me. Renshaw had left an hour since, taking Marchmont's letter with him and leaving the particular silence of a room that has recently held urgent conversation. I had poured a drink I did not finish and stood for some time at the window looking down at the courtyard, and eventually forced myself to sit.

I had thought myself followed on the walk back from the taxi. Probably I had not been. The pavements were wet and well-lit and I had looked back three times and found nothing. The fourth time there was a figure in a doorway on the far side of the road who might simply have been sheltering from the drizzle. By the time I had my own door closed behind me I had rationalised the whole thing into nervous exhaustion, which was no doubt what it was.

The broken crate from Dulwich sat against the study wall. Renshaw had wanted it examined and the forensics team had released it, and now it sat there in the way that objects connected to violent events sit in rooms—present in a way that ordinary objects are not. I made a point of not looking at it directly and opened the book.

I had reviewed *Assyrian Mythology* for a podcast episode some years earlier and had found it formidable. Reading it now, under these particular circumstances, in this particular silence, was

an entirely different experience. Marchmont's prose was dry and careful and scrupulously sourced, and his scepticism about the continued existence of any organisation claiming descent from the original Hashishin was visible on every page: the repeated qualifications, the phrases like "the supposed modern tradition" and "if any such body persisted into the present era." He had been wrong. The wrongness had killed him. Now his book sat on my desk and I read his careful sentences and thought about what it had cost him to be that wrong.

The chapter on the order's methods was the longest in the book.

The Hashishin had, at the height of their medieval influence, developed a system for producing their most capable operatives that Marchmont described as having no parallel in any other military or religious tradition he had studied. It began in childhood. Boys selected for particular qualities—physical flexibility, an unusual capacity for stillness, what Marchmont called with characteristic precision "a constitutional indifference to discomfort"—were removed from their families and placed in conditions of structured isolation, their existence reduced entirely to instruction and repetition. The physical training was extreme by any measure, and produced capabilities that observers across several centuries had consistently struggled to describe in natural terms.

They could move through openings that appeared to admit no human body. Not by some conjuror's trick but through a combination of skeletal flexibility, breath control, and a

tolerance for compression that years of deliberate conditioning had made habitual. They could remain in complete stillness for extended periods in positions that would have been impossible to sustain without that same conditioning. They could wait—in spaces above doors, behind furniture, inside objects—for hours, without voluntary movement, without audible breathing, effectively absent from a room they physically occupied.

I stopped reading.

Inside objects.

I looked at the crate.

The lid had been forced by Renshaw's garden fork and the sides had sprung. In its current state it was obviously empty. But I found myself thinking about it in transit—being loaded into a courier's van somewhere, being unloaded at Marchmont's door, sitting in his study while he worked at the lid with a screwdriver. How long it had been in there. Whether it had moved at all during the journey, or whether the training Marchmont described had made that kind of stillness simply the default condition.

I returned to the text. Marchmont went on to describe the Hashishin's use of silent ranged weapons: a hollow tube through which a dart treated with a preparation derived from plant compounds could be directed with accuracy at distances of up to ten metres. The preparation was not always fatal. Its primary effect, in standard doses, was rapid incapacitation, and Marchmont noted with a scholar's controlled distaste that it

appeared to have been formulated less to kill than to ensure the target could not describe what they had seen.

He added, in a footnote I had not noticed on my earlier reading, that the tube was typically no longer than a forearm and could be introduced through a gap of less than two centimetres without the operator becoming visible.

My study door began, very slowly, to open.

It moved by fractions—continuous, perfectly even fractions, with none of the small hesitations or accelerations produced by a hand. I had been watching it for perhaps three seconds before my mind would accept what my eyes were reporting. The draught possibility lasted about one second. The settling building possibility lasted less than that. Then I simply sat and watched the door open and felt a cold that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room.

I cannot say with any certainty why I moved when I did. My pen had been rolling towards the edge of the desk since I sat down; I had been watching it and not catching it in the distracted way of a man whose attention is elsewhere. It reached the edge. I bent to take it from the floor.

Something passed through the air an inch above the back of my neck with a sound I can only describe as a whisper—the sound of something moving very fast through a very small space—and hit the wall behind me with a small, flat impact. Not much louder than a finger-tap.

I came upright in a single movement. I had the heavy torch from the desk in my hand before I had made any conscious decision

to reach for it, and I hit the light switch with my other hand as I pulled the door fully open.

The passage went from complete darkness to full light in the same instant.

At the far end of the passage—between me and the open bathroom door—I saw a figure. I had perhaps one second of clear view before it was through the bathroom door and gone, and I will try to set down exactly what I saw in that second, because it has stayed with me more precisely than almost anything else from that period.

It was slight. It was small. It moved with a quality I can only describe as liquid—not the movement of someone running but the movement of someone for whom passing through a confined space at speed is so habitual that it bears no relationship to what most people understand as running. There was no panic in it, no urgency. It simply was in one place and then was in another, and the transition was so smooth as to seem edited.

I went after it. The bathroom window was open—had been open all evening, and I had not given it a thought. I reached it in time to see the drainpipe descending to the courtyard below, thick and old and perfectly capable of bearing a person's weight on the exterior brackets.

I looked down.

The courtyard was empty. Brightly lit on all four sides by the building's exterior lamps, surrounded by solid walls, the stone still gleaming from the earlier rain. Not a movement

anywhere. Not a shadow out of place. The gate at the far end, which required a key I had in my own pocket, was closed.

I stood at the window for what was probably two minutes, looking at the empty courtyard and listening to the ordinary sounds of the small hours: traffic on Fleet Street beyond the arch, a siren somewhere north of the river, the city going about its business with complete indifference to what I had just seen.

Then I went back to the desk and looked at where the dart had lodged in the plaster. It was roughly where my head would have been if I had been sitting upright. I took it out carefully with a folded page from my notebook, which I wrapped around it and put in my coat pocket, and then I sat down and looked at Marchmont's book lying open on the desk and at the broken crate against the wall and at the small hole in the plaster, and I thought about a figure in a box being patient for however many hours it takes to drive from a workshop to a study in Dulwich.

I called Renshaw.

He answered on the second ring. He did not sound as though I had woken him, which told me something about how he had spent the hour since leaving my flat.

"Something came here tonight," I said. "Through the front door, along the passage, through the bathroom window. It put a dart in my wall." I paused. "I think it was what was in the box."

A silence. Then Renshaw said, "Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Don't touch the dart. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

He was there in fifteen. I had put the kettle on and was sitting looking at the open page of *Assyrian Mythology* when he arrived, and I did not get up to open the door because I had already left it on the latch, and I did not look up from the book because I had just found the passage in Marchmont's footnotes that I realised, reading it the second time, explained precisely how the courtyard had been empty.

The Hashishin's most experienced operatives, Marchmont wrote, were reported to be capable of remaining motionless in plain sight for extended periods by exploiting the tendency of an alarmed observer to scan for movement rather than presence. They did not hide. They simply stopped.

CHAPTER SIX

THE RING OF THE PROPHET

The offices of Thurlow and Associates were in Chancery Lane, in one of those buildings that have been law offices since law offices existed and give no sign of becoming anything else. I arrived at ten to find Renshaw already there, sitting in the outer room with the expression he wears when he has not slept.

Mr. Thurlow was a small, precise man in his seventies who had the habit of absolute stillness when listening and of speaking only once a complete sentence had formed. He had managed Marchmont's affairs for a number of years, he said, and the instructions he was now executing had been lodged with him some months before the events described here, which, given what had since occurred, he found himself at a loss to characterise.

"Professor Marchmont's instructions are explicit," he said. "The slipper is to be transferred from the safe at the Dulwich property to the British Antiquarian Museum, where it is to be housed in a secured display case in the Islamic and Middle Eastern collection. The transport is to be carried out by a practising Muslim—the Professor was insistent on this point and offered reasons which he asked me not to share."

"He believed it would protect whoever handled it," Renshaw said.

"That appears to have been his reasoning, yes." Thurlow allowed a pause. "The keys to the museum case are to be held at all times by Mr. Brennan." He looked at me. "You were named

specifically. The Professor believed this arrangement would afford you a measure of protection."

"He was mistaken," I said.

"Yes. Nevertheless, those are his instructions, and I am required to pursue them."

Renshaw looked across at me. "I have made inquiries this morning," he said, "and I cannot find a single Muslim who will agree to go within ten metres of Marchmont's safe. Whatever Yusuf of Aleppo is, he has reach. I suspect the word has travelled further and faster than we appreciate."

We talked for a while longer without resolving anything of practical use, and I came out into Chancery Lane at eleven with a set of keys I had not wanted and a responsibility I was not certain how to discharge. Renshaw had gone back to the Yard. I walked home.

The flat felt different without the crate in it. Renshaw's people had taken it before dawn, along with the dart, and the study had been put back to a semblance of order by someone who was not me. I sat at the desk with a coffee and Marchmont's book open at the chapter on the Hashishin and tried to think clearly, which I found I could not do particularly well.

The bell rang at half past twelve.

I had not been expecting anyone. The sound brought me upright with a sharpness that told me more about the state of my nerves than I cared to examine. I went to the intercom.

A man's voice, measured and courteous: "Mr. Brennan? I believe I may be useful to you, and you perhaps to me. I would be grateful for a few minutes."

I pressed the release.

He came up the stairs without any sound I could hear, and was already at the landing when I opened the study door. He was tall—taller than the voice had suggested—and dressed in European clothes of good quality, a dark suit that had been kept with care for a long time. Above the collar of a white shirt he wore a green turban, traditionally associated in some contexts with a sharif—a descendant of the Prophet. His beard was white and trimmed and his features were sharp and fine-boned, and he carried himself with the unhurried authority of a man who has never been required to hurry by anyone.

He bowed very slightly. I stood aside and he entered with a formal courtesy in which there was, I have always thought, a degree of patient composure that quietly reverses who is host and who is guest. I gave him the better chair. He sat with his eyes cast slightly downward, making no claim on the room.

"I have followed something of recent events through the papers," he began, "and I understand why a Muslim may be required to assist with certain practical arrangements. I believe I can help with that. But I wished first to speak with you as a friend of the late Professor."

"I am not sure I was his friend," I said. "I knew him for a fortnight."

"You were the person he chose to trust." The old man's voice was gentle, without any particular inflection. "The distinction may matter less than you suppose."

We looked at each other for a moment across the desk.

"The slipper was stolen," he said. Not an accusation—a beginning, offered in the tone of a man identifying the point from which a shared account can properly start. "It was removed from a place of sacred keeping by a man who had been given access to it in trust. This is not disputed."

"No," I said. "It is not disputed."

"And yet the object now sits in a safe in a dead man's house, guarded by the police, destined for public exhibition in an institution that holds a very great many other objects removed from their origins by the same mechanism. The method changes with the era—scholarship travels first class where the army once led the way—but the structure is the same. A thing is taken. It goes behind glass. It becomes heritage."

I did not argue the point. I had thought something like it myself since the night Marchmont told me why he had done it, and the honesty of it sat with me uncomfortably.

"You are not wrong," I said. "Marchmont knew it. He said as much."

The old man nodded once, as if this confirmed something he had not been entirely certain of. "Then you will understand that those who pursue the slipper do so not from hatred of your institutions or your laws, but because what they seek cannot be resolved by your laws. Your laws were not designed to resolve it."

They were in many cases designed to prevent its resolution." He paused. "The slipper should be returned. The proper people to return it are those who know where it belongs and why it matters."

"The proper method," I said, "is not murder."

He looked at me steadily.

"The hands that were severed," I said, "belonged to people who did not know what they were carrying. A dock worker. A ship's steward. A scholar who had his failings but who was owed something better than what happened to him in Dulwich. Whatever the justice of the cause, I cannot come to terms with those who use that as their instrument. I hope you understand why I say that."

"I do not come here to defend the penalty," he said, very quietly. "I come here to tell you that the simplest resolution is also the one that results in no further harm. The slipper is returned to those who will care for it properly, and the people involved in its temporary displacement are permitted to go on with their lives."

"You are asking for the key."

He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and placed on the desk between us a folded sheet of paper. I looked at it: a letter in Arabic, carrying a seal I did not recognise, signed in a hand that had the quality of long habit and absolute certainty.

"A written assurance," he said, "from one whose authority the relevant parties are bound to respect. If the key is given to me, the matter concludes. Whatever was contemplated for those

connected with the slipper's removal—including yourself—is set aside. You have my word on it, and that word is worth rather more than it may appear."

I sat with my hands flat on the desk and looked at the letter and at the key Thurlow had given me that morning and at the man across from me, and I thought about Marchmont under his desk and the dart in my wall and the empty courtyard, and I thought about whether the assurance being offered was worth what it would cost me to accept it.

Marchmont had mutilated people. Had stolen a thing he should never have touched. Had refused, in the end, to give it up because he believed the threat itself was his only protection. He had been right about that, and it had not been enough.

"It is impossible," I said at last. "I cannot come to terms with people who shield murder, and I cannot come to terms with this without doing so. I am sorry."

He rose with the same gravity with which he had sat down.

"*Es-salam 'aleykum*," I said—the traditional close, the peace-offering, the only honest thing I had left to offer him.

He turned at the door and looked at me with an expression I found, against all expectation, that I could not quite read as hostile.

"*Wa-'aleykum*," he replied, and bowed, and went.

I stood at the window and watched him cross the courtyard and pass under the arch into Fleet Street without looking back. I stood there for some time, thinking about the conversation and

about the letter still on my desk, and then I thought about the ring.

I had noticed it when we shook hands at the door—a ring on his left hand, a stone of deep green cut in the shape of a crescent. I had registered it and filed it away and now it came back with an insistence that made me turn from the window.

I sat down and found the passage in *Assyrian Mythology* in under a minute. Marchmont's prose, as always, was spare and precise.

Each head of the self-styled order is invested, at the time of his appointment, with the Ring of the Prophet. The stone is green. Its shape is that of the crescent or scimitar. No other member of the order may wear its like.

I put the book down on the desk and sat for a moment in the afternoon quiet of the study.

"God in heaven," I said, to the empty room. "That was Yusuf of Aleppo."

CHAPTER SEVEN

FIRST ATTEMPT ON THE SAFE

I had not slept well. This was not surprising. What was perhaps surprising was that I had slept at all, given that I had spent the three hours before bed re-reading the Hashishin chapter in Marchmont's book with the thoroughness one applies to a subject that has become personally relevant.

The final footnote—the one about remaining motionless in plain sight by exploiting the tendency of an alarmed observer to scan for movement rather than presence—I had read four times. Each time it did something slightly different to my understanding of the empty courtyard.

Renshaw arrived before I had finished breakfast. He accepted coffee without sitting down and stood at the window looking out at the courtyard below, in the way he looks at things when he is deciding how to explain them.

"Someone had a go at Marchmont's safe last night," he said.

He turned, and I could see from his expression that the night had been both eventful and deeply unsatisfying.

Two plain-clothes officers—Skelton and Brodie—had been stationed in the study at Dulwich, with a uniformed constable on the gate at the far end of the elm avenue. It had been a warm night, unusually so for the season, and the French windows on the west side of the study had been left open for air. Brodie had been sitting at the desk near the safe. Skelton had been by the window. The constable had been at the gate.

At approximately one in the morning, Skelton heard a sound from the direction of the gate. Brodie struck a match to relight his pipe. Then, Skelton told Renshaw, Brodie simply let the match fall, clenched both fists, and dropped from his chair to the floor. Almost in the same instant—Skelton was already half out of his own chair—something struck him hard behind the right ear and he remembered nothing until the early light was coming through the French windows and Brodie was groaning somewhere on the floor beside him.

"And Brodie's account?"

"Brodie says he saw Skelton knocked down first." Renshaw picked up his mug and put it down again without drinking from it. "Then something hit him."

"They were watching each other."

"Apparently so. Each of them saw the other go down before they went down themselves. The constable at the gate has essentially the same story—was standing, watching the road, something struck him from behind, that was that. No one saw anyone. No one heard anything from outside before it happened." He shook his head. "I have been a police officer for twenty-two years and I have never been handed anything like it."

I thought about the passage in Marchmont's footnotes. I did not mention it.

"Their body cameras?" I asked.

"Skelton's shows Brodie's chair, then Brodie dropping, then the ceiling, then nothing. Brodie's shows the desk and the safe, then the edge of Skelton's jacket, then the floor. The

constable's shows the gate and the avenue and then the sky."

Renshaw finally sat down. "Whatever struck them was faster than a reflex turn of the head. And the head wounds—I had the surgeon look at them this morning—are consistent with a blunt impact from a considerable distance. Not a punch. Not a cosh. Something thrown, or projected."

"And the safe?"

"Someone worked on it for the best part of an hour. The lock damage tells us that much. Marchmont had the mechanism upgraded some years ago—whatever was working on it either lacked the right equipment or ran out of time when the relief constable arrived at four. The safe held."

"This time," I said.

"This time." He looked at me directly. "I don't think we have many more this-times available to us. They know the safe is there. They know the slipper is in it. They know their window for reaching it before we move it is not unlimited, and they know now what the lock requires. I expect another attempt tonight, and I expect it to be better prepared."

I had been thinking about the layout of the study as Renshaw described it—the French windows to the west, the south-facing windows looking onto the overgrown shrubbery, the safe in the corner, the old chapel at the end of the avenue just within the boundary of the grounds. The chapel Marchmont had mentioned in his book in some other context, in a footnote I could not now place.

"The grounds were searched?" I asked.

"Thoroughly. Nothing found." He paused. "There is a patch of disturbed earth near the wall of the old chapel at the end of the avenue. It may be nothing. There are also marks on the door of the garden shed that suggest it was opened and closed last night, but we can't say by whom or for what purpose."

"Or may not be nothing."

"Or may not be." He stood up again. Renshaw is a man who thinks more easily on his feet. "I want to go down there tonight. To wait in the study as Skelton and Brodie were waiting. I want you with me."

"Why me specifically?"

"Because you understand something of what we're dealing with, and I want a second intelligence in the room that isn't simply following procedure." He met my eye. "Also because I have read Marchmont's book now, and there is a passage about their ranged weapons that I would very much like to put to the test in controlled conditions."

I looked at him.

"The footnote on page two hundred and twelve," I said. "The hollow tube."

"The hollow tube," he confirmed. "If we can anticipate the method, we have a chance of anticipating the angle. And if we anticipate the angle—" He left it there.

"What about the windows?"

"Open, as they were last night. I want the conditions to be the same. If they've watched the house—and I have no doubt they

have—I want them to see what they expect to see.” He picked up his jacket. “I’ll collect you at ten. Bring the book.”

After he had gone I sat for some time at my desk, turning the problem of the previous night over in my mind: three trained police officers, two of them watching each other, rendered simultaneously unconscious from the outside without any of them seeing who did it, by something that moved faster than a person could turn their head.

I opened *Assyrian Mythology* again and read more slowly this time, not the footnotes but the main text, the long careful paragraphs about the Hashishin’s methods of approach and withdrawal. Marchmont wrote about them with the slightly puzzled respect of a scholar encountering an excellence he had not expected. They had, he wrote, operated for centuries as if the architecture of the world—its buildings, its walls, its distances—were a set of conventions they had simply chosen not to observe.

Outside, the courtyard was bright and empty and completely ordinary, and I sat looking at it and thought about the difference between ordinary and safe, which I was beginning to understand were not the same thing at all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE VIOLET EYES AGAIN

I had been attempting to work for two hours when I gave up and went for a walk.

The difficulty was not inability to focus in general but inability to focus on anything except the woman with the violet eyes, which was not a productive direction since she had appeared in this story twice and vanished twice without leaving anything useful behind. She had known enough about the threat against Marchmont to warn me of it, which was itself a form of knowledge that wanted explanation. She had asked me to promise not to speak of her visit. I had promised. The promise was beginning to feel less like an obligation honoured and more like an obstacle maintained.

The afternoon was clear and cold, the recent warmth finally broken. I walked west along the Embankment and then up through the Strand, watching the traffic and attempting to think about anything else, and I had very nearly managed it when I heard, from the entrance of a hotel I was passing, a woman's voice saying: "Wait here for me"—and something in the quality of it stopped me before I had consciously decided to stop.

I turned.

A woman in a pale coat was already through the door. I had seen no more than a fraction of profile, and the turn of a wrist as she spoke, and the particular set of her posture as she passed through. It should not have been enough. It was entirely enough.

I went in after her.

The lobby was the kind that manages to be simultaneously grand and anonymous: marble, diffused light, the muted convergence of a hundred separate purposes. She had not reached the lifts. She was crossing towards the far staircase, and she paused—the pause of someone choosing not to hurry—and then continued without looking back.

I fell into step beside her.

"I think we have met," I said.

She turned. Her face, in the full light of the lobby, was composed to a degree that most people achieve only with considerable practice. She looked at me as a woman looks at a stranger who has misjudged his welcome—with a cool and precisely calibrated displeasure—and said nothing.

"We have met twice," I said. "You left a note through my letter box. And then we spoke briefly outside a hotel not far from here, about three weeks ago."

She held my gaze with those remarkable eyes for a moment, and something moved in their depths—appraisal, or calculation, or some private adjustment I could not interpret—and then she said, in a voice with no trace of anything I could place as foreign: "I believe you have mistaken me for someone else."

"I have not," I said.

"Then I think you are going to find yourself in an embarrassing position." She glanced around the lobby with an expression suggesting we were already attracting attention, which

we were not. "This is a public space. I have not invited your company."

"I have a Detective Inspector at Scotland Yard on my contact list," I said. "He is actively investigating the death of a man named Professor Edward Marchmont. He would very much like to speak to anyone with prior knowledge of the threat against him. You had that knowledge. I can call him now or you can give me three minutes. It is genuinely your choice."

A pause. Very brief. The length of a breath taken and not quite released.

"I have no idea who Professor Marchmont is," she said.

"You knew enough to warn me he was going to be killed," I said. "That makes you material to a murder inquiry whether you choose to acknowledge it or not."

She studied me for a moment that went on longer than was comfortable. Then, without any perceptible change in expression: "Three minutes. Come."

She led me to the lift without another word. We rode to the third floor and she brought me to a small lounge off the corridor—half a dozen armchairs, a low table, a window looking down onto the street—and sat with the ease of someone entirely accustomed to hotels.

She crossed her legs and watched me across the table. In the lamp-warmed light of the room those eyes were more striking than I had remembered them, and I was aware that I was registering this fact at a moment when I needed to be registering something more useful.

"Well," she said.

"Who are you?" I said. "And what is your connection to what happened to Marchmont?"

"I am not going to answer either of those questions," she said, with a pleasantness that was entirely genuine and entirely without concession. "You said three minutes. Try to use them."

"Are you connected to the organisation known as the Hashishin?"

Something happened in her expression. It was not what I had anticipated—not guilt, not calculation, but something much closer to genuine offence.

"Please do not connect me to that." The pleasantness had gone, replaced by a directness that I found, briefly, more convincing than anything else she had said. "I have no connection to them. No sympathy with their methods. No interest in their purposes. I want that understood clearly."

"But you knew what they were planning."

"I knew what they had threatened," she said. "Which is not the same thing. And I knew it from a source that was not part of that organisation and was, in fact, very much opposed to it." She leaned forward slightly. "I came to you because I thought you could warn Marchmont in time to prevent what happened. I was wrong. I am sorry about that. But I cannot tell you anything about the Hashishin because I know nothing about the Hashishin."

It was the most she had said to me in any of our three meetings. It had the texture of something largely true, or at least of something the speaker believed to be true, and I found

myself wanting to accept it at face value, which was precisely why I distrusted myself.

"Then who is your source?" I said. "Who told you about the threat?"

She leaned back. The pleasantness returned at a slightly reduced temperature. "Your three minutes are up."

She rose and offered her hand with the finality of a full stop. I shook it. She thanked me for my company in a tone that did not mean it and walked towards the corridor.

I sat for a moment, then followed. The corridor was empty in both directions. The nearest lift indicator showed it descending from the third floor. I watched it reach ground level and then, almost at once, begin to rise again.

At the front desk the duty manager confirmed pleasantly that the lady was not a guest of the hotel. He could not recall seeing her enter, though he had been at the desk all afternoon.

I went back to the Strand and stood in the thin November cold, watching the traffic and working through what she had actually told me, as distinct from what she had said. Not Hashishin—I believed her, which might have been naive. She had knowledge from a source opposed to the organisation. She was frightened of something, or for someone, that was not me. And she had chosen to use that knowledge to warn a man she apparently had no prior connection to.

Three meetings. Nothing solid. The promise intact.

I walked back to the flat and called Renshaw.

"Tonight," I said, when he answered. "What time are we leaving for Dulwich?"

He told me. We went over the arrangements. I said nothing about the woman with the violet eyes, and the silence felt, as it always did, like both the right thing and the wrong one simultaneously.

CHAPTER NINE

SECOND ATTEMPT ON THE SAFE

We arrived at Dulwich as the last daylight left the sky. Renshaw had arranged to be dropped at the end of the road and we walked the final quarter-mile on foot, letting ourselves in through the garden gate at the side of the property where a constable admitted us without a word. The day officers were gone. The night watch was ourselves and one uniformed man at the front gate, which Renshaw had insisted upon despite—or because of—what had happened to the previous three.

The house had a different quality in darkness. In daylight, in the immediate aftermath of Marchmont's death, the disorder and the police presence had given it a texture of recent event. Empty now, its rooms dark and its grounds very still in the cold autumn air, it had the settled weight of a house that has finished being someone's and has not yet decided what else to become.

Renshaw took the armchair near the French windows—the loggia side, opening west onto the unkempt lawn. I sat closer to the desk, with the safe in the corner to my left. Both the French windows and the south-facing windows that looked onto the overgrown shrubbery stood open, the cold coming in freely, on Renshaw's insistence.

"Last night's conditions as closely as possible," he said, settling in. "If they're watching—and I have no doubt they are—I want them to see what they expect to see."

He had, I noticed, a weapon at his hip that I had not seen before. He caught my look. "Specific authorisation," he said briefly. We left it there.

The old chapel at the end of the elm avenue was visible from my chair as a dark shape against the slightly less dark sky, the avenue running between it and the house like a ruled line. Renshaw had returned twice to the disturbed earth near the chapel wall without arriving at a conclusion. I sat looking at the chapel, then at the loggia, then at the dark garden beyond, and then at Renshaw in silhouette against the western window, and I began thinking about the patterns of light.

The previous night: Brodie at the desk, Skelton by the window. The moon had been full and had moved around to shine through the south windows and through the French windows together, from approximately one in the morning. Brodie at the desk would have been backlit from the south. Skelton, by the French windows, would have been silhouetted against the lighter rectangle of the opening. Both of them visible from the shrubbery. Both of them visible, from a different angle, from the direction of the chapel.

I said this to Renshaw quietly.

He was silent for a moment. "You're saying they fired from outside the windows."

"Through the windows. From a distance. I'm saying the constable was hit at the gate and both officers were hit inside the room almost simultaneously, which means at least two of them

working from separate positions. And Marchmont describes a weapon in the footnotes—

“From that distance? Through an open window?”

“A sling. The ancient Persian type. He mentions heavy clay projectiles—similar kinetic effect to a sand-bag, but deliverable from twenty-five or thirty metres with practice. It would explain the body cameras showing nothing from outside. No one needed to come near the windows.”

The particular silence that followed was the one Renshaw produces when he is rebuilding a structure he had assembled incorrectly the first time. “That’s why we found the disturbed earth near the chapel wall,” he said at last.

“And why three officers were hit from different directions without any of them seeing anyone.”

He nodded once, slowly, and said nothing further. We settled in to wait.

Renshaw went out at half past midnight for the constable’s report, the elm avenue silver-black in the moonlight as he walked it. He was back in four minutes and we sat again without speaking. The house made no sounds. The grounds made no sounds. The cold came in through the open windows in a steady, patient way that had something of the quality of the thing we were waiting for.

The moon moved through the course of an hour. By one o’clock it had cleared the roof of the old chapel and was laying a rectangle of cold light across the study floor between us, picking out the parquet grain with an excessive clarity. Looking

at it, I became aware of two things at nearly the same moment: that I was now backlit from the south, and that Renshaw, sitting near the French windows, was silhouetted clearly against the paler opening behind him.

I was in the process of saying something about this when a sound came from the direction of the gate—not a voice, not a footstep, but a particular absence of sound following a faint impact, the sound of a man suddenly not being where he was—and Renshaw came half-upright from his chair with one hand going to his hip.

Something crossed the moonlit rectangle on the floor with a fast, blurred arc, struck him behind the right ear, and he went down.

I was already out of my chair, reaching for my notebook that had slid from the desk arm to the floor. The projectile that came through the south window passed an inch above the back of my head and struck the face of the safe with a hard, dense crack that I felt through the floor.

Renshaw was face-down and not moving.

I had his weapon in my hand before I had fully decided to take it. I have handled firearms in the field on several occasions in the course of my work, and the weight was not unfamiliar. I moved back against the wall beside the desk and waited with it.

The loggia went dark. Something had come over the railing.

A figure entered through the French windows—low, fast, purposeful, moving directly for Renshaw's position. A second

figure appeared simultaneously at the south window: forearms on the sill, beginning to come through.

I fired once.

The sound in the closed room was very large. The figure at the south window dropped back outside. The figure near Renshaw straightened and crossed the loggia and was over the railing before I had drawn a full breath, and by the time I reached the French windows there was nothing on the loggia, nothing on the lawn, nothing moving anywhere in the shadow-pooled darkness under the elms.

I found the light switch. The lamp on the desk came on.

Renshaw was breathing. The wound behind his right ear matched the ones the surgeon had described on Skelton and Brodie—a hard bruised impact, the kind left by a heavy thrown mass rather than a punch or a cosh. Lying near his outstretched hand was the thing that had made it: a ball of dense grey clay, slightly flattened on one face where it had connected. About the size of a tennis ball, perhaps slightly larger. Irregularly formed in the way of something shaped for function rather than appearance.

Near the south window, on the floor where it had fallen after striking the safe, lay a second one, identical.

On the loggia I found what had been dropped in the hurry of retreat: a section of heavy bamboo, perhaps forty centimetres long, with a cord attached at one end and, on the cord, a loop of thick leather the size of a palm. I turned it over in my hands

for a moment before I understood what I was holding. Then I understood it completely.

A sling. The oldest ranged weapon in human history, or close to it. The kind described in three thousand years of military records as capable, in trained hands, of accuracy and impact that confounded observers who had never thought about what a wrist and a cord and a clay ball could do at the right distance. Marchmont had described it in a footnote. Yusuf of Aleppo had been deploying it in the grounds of a Dulwich cottage against Metropolitan Police officers, and it had worked on them exactly as it had worked on armies.

I stood on the loggia with the sling in my hand and looked down the elm avenue, and it was then that I saw the shape at the far end of it. Not approaching. Not retreating. Simply standing in the shadow margin at the boundary of the light, watching the house with a stillness I was beginning to recognise.

I did not move. The shape raised one hand slightly—not a threat, not a greeting; I have thought about the gesture since and I am still not sure what it was. An acknowledgement, perhaps. A marking of the fact that we had both learned something tonight.

A break in the cloud overhead sent a thin beam of moonlight down the avenue for two or three seconds. In it I saw the figure's left hand, briefly and clearly, and on one finger a stone of deep cold green cut in the shape of a crescent.

The cloud closed. The avenue was empty.

The constable arrived at a run seven minutes later, having heard the shot. He found Renshaw sitting upright against the desk

with his hand to his head, wearing the expression of a man whose professional composure has just been tested more thoroughly than he would have chosen. He found me on the loggia steps looking at the avenue with the sling in one hand and Renshaw's weapon in the other.

"The chapel wall," said Renshaw, when he could speak clearly.

"The chapel wall," I said. "Twenty-five metres, minimum. Through an open window, in the dark, from a standing start."

He looked at the clay balls on the floor and at the sling and at me. "I had a firearm," he said. "I was watching the room, the windows, the avenue. I was watching everything I could watch." He paused. "And I didn't see a thing coming."

"That is precisely the point of them," I said.

He was taken to hospital for observation, which he argued against and lost. I gave a full statement to the arriving officers, answered their questions about the fired shot with as much precision as I could, and then sat alone in the study with the lamp on and the two clay balls on the desk and Marchmont's book open at the footnote, and thought about an old man standing patient in the dark at the end of an elm avenue, watching everything, waiting for the world to arrange itself according to what had been written.

CHAPTER TEN

AT THE BRITISH ANTIQUARIAN MUSEUM

The slipper reached the British Antiquarian Museum on a Thursday morning in early December, carried by a man named Karidas—a Greek national who had converted to Islam some years before and who had, on two previous occasions, performed similar services for institutions requiring religious compliance in the handling of sensitive artefacts. He accomplished the transfer efficiently, accepted his fee, and by the time I visited the following week had apparently returned to his business in Soho without leaving a contact number. Renshaw, who had been trying to find him, described this as predictable.

The day I attended was the first day of restricted access: invited visitors only, the public admission beginning the following week. Renshaw met me at the entrance. Charlton, the curator, found us in the hall and led us through.

Charlton was a lean, careful man with the permanently tired eyes of someone who has been responsible for valuable things for a long time and has spent most of that time worrying about them. He talked as he walked, in the practiced way of a man managing several audiences simultaneously: briefing us, reassuring the scholars around us, and delivering a public statement about security arrangements for the benefit of anyone in the room who might be listening for professional reasons.

The Layard Room occupied the end of a wing on the first floor. It was named for the painting of Sir Austen Layard that

faced the entrance—the archaeologist's expression combining scholarly distance and adventurer's confidence in proportions that I found, under these particular circumstances, slightly too appropriate. Four windows, all with iron bars: two looking onto the museum's front lawn and two onto the square beyond. One door, communicating with the adjacent Assyrian gallery. First floor throughout.

The slipper sat in a single case at the centre of the room. A brass rail at two metres kept visitors from the glass. Around it, Charlton had left the kind of respectful emptiness reserved for objects that require no context.

It looked like what it was: a fragment of ancient moroccan leather, the original red colour faded almost to brown, roughly the size and shape of a child's slipper. Centuries old. No obvious monetary value. The thing that had killed Marchmont and mutilated three other people in the course of reaching this case.

Several distinguished scholars were already gathered at the far end of the room. Charlton spoke quietly about the acquisition—the conditions of the bequest, the arrangements for access, the steps taken to ensure that no unbeliever's hand had touched either the slipper or its case during the transfer. He spoke carefully and slightly too loudly for his stated audience, which I took to be deliberate.

I became aware of a figure near the east-facing windows who was rather too still. Not still in the way of a person absorbed in a catalogue. Still in the way of a person listening to a conversation not directed at them, who has arranged their

apparent attention on something else as cover for it. The figure was tall, dressed in a dark coat and scarf, and had their back to me. I watched them for a moment, then touched Renshaw's arm and nodded in that direction.

Renshaw's eyes moved, registered, and returned to Charlton without changing expression.

When I looked back the figure was gone. I glanced at the officer by the door, who had not moved.

"Did he pass you?" I murmured to Renshaw.

"Without the officer registering it," Renshaw murmured back. "I noticed." He said nothing further, and neither did I, because Charlton was detailing the key arrangements: the case keys held by Brennan at his bank, access after hours requiring two separate authorisations, CCTV covering every angle of the Layard Room without exception. He said the last detail with a particular emphasis I suspected was directed at the room rather than at us.

It was while Charlton was finishing that I noticed the American.

He was standing at the lower end of the room, apparently consulting his catalogue with the mild interest of a visitor who has come for the experience rather than for any single exhibit. The hat was the first thing: a wide-brimmed Stetson of dark felt, an American Westerner's hat worn with the ease of a man who has never felt the need to adapt his personal style to his surroundings. He was lean, somewhere between forty and fifty-five, clean-shaven, with a watchful face and a quality of contained amusement that seemed independent of anything currently

happening in the room. His right arm hung slightly closer to his body than his left. He was not consulting his catalogue. He was examining the case with the methodical, specific attention of a man taking measurements he will use later.

I had seen him before. I could not place where.

Renshaw found me at the far end of the room as the scholars' group began to disperse towards the exit.

"The American," I said.

"Earl Calloway," Renshaw said. "Currently the most accomplished acquisitions criminal active anywhere in the English-speaking world, which is a careful way of saying he has taken things from better-secured places than this and has not once been charged with anything that stuck. Interpol has a file on him in six countries. He is also here entirely legally and there is nothing whatsoever I can do about that." He paused. "He has two first-class transatlantic bookings on a flight leaving in three weeks."

"He travels alone."

"Always has. One ticket is explicable. Two is a question I would very much like the answer to." He glanced across the room to where Calloway had moved to a different angle on the case. "My original thought was that Yusuf brought him in—Calloway doesn't work cheaply, but the Hashishin appear to have considerable resources. But it doesn't sit right. Calloway has never worked for anyone. He doesn't need to and I don't think he'd tolerate the arrangement."

"So he's independent."

"That's what I keep coming back to. Which raises the question of why an independent operator of his calibre has any interest in a twelve-century-old piece of moroccan leather with no commercial value."

I thought about two first-class tickets. I thought about the woman with the violet eyes saying *a source that was not part of that organisation and was very much opposed to it*. I thought about what kind of person would be opposed to the Hashishin for reasons entirely unconnected to justice or morality.

"A third party," I said. "Operating independently, for their own purposes. Not Yusuf's agent—Yusuf's competition."

Renshaw looked at me steadily. "What makes you say that?"

I was on the point of telling him about the woman in the hotel when Calloway, from across the room, caught my eye. His expression was pleasant and completely opaque. He nodded, very slightly, in the way people nod when they recognise someone whose name they have not been given, and returned his attention to the case.

"It seems the obvious explanation for the tickets," I said, and left it at that.

One of the westward-facing sunblinds came down at that moment with a sudden rushing sound that turned every head in the room. The cord had given way. The blind hung there, flooding the end wall with a bar of grey December light.

Charlton went to it at once. He stood looking at it for a moment in the way he had stood looking at Marchmont's case when

he first described what the slipper had cost, and then he turned to us.

Renshaw and I walked up the length of the room. The blind had dropped from the westernmost window—the one closest to the slipper case. At roughly a metre from its lower edge, at about three metres above the floor, a section of the fabric had been removed. A rectangle of perhaps thirty centimetres, cut on all four sides with something sharp and steady.

"When," said Charlton. It was not quite a question.

"Not today," Renshaw said. "The cut edges aren't fresh. This was done before the room opened." He stood back and looked at the geometry of it: the angle from the hole to the slipper case, the trajectory a shaft of light would follow through that opening at night, from a specific point in the sky, at a specific hour. He was quiet for a moment. "The CCTV," he said.

"Covers this window," Charlton said. "Yes. I'll pull the archive footage now."

He left the room. Renshaw remained where he was, looking at the hole in the blind and then at the case and then back at the hole, working the geometry.

"This was done by someone who had been in this room before today," he said. "Someone who knew the blind would stay up until the cord failed, and who knew that when it dropped the hole would face that window at that height." He turned to me. "They're not going to come over the roof and file through the bars. They're going to use a light. They're going to put a beam on the case

from outside, through that hole, and use it to guide something in."

"Guide what in?"

He looked at the iron bars in the window. Then at the case. Then at me.

"I don't know yet," he said. "But I intend to be here when they try."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE HOLE IN THE BLIND

I left the museum at the same time as the invited visitors, Charlton having offered to close the room while Renshaw organised the CCTV review. I came down the steps into the cold grey afternoon and stood for a moment on the pavement, turning my collar up and letting the geometry of the hole work itself through.

Renshaw's reading was right. The hole was not a breach—it was an alignment tool. Someone intended to put a beam of light through it, through the barred window, onto the case. The bars would stop a person. They would not stop whatever came in on the end of that beam: something small enough, something with sufficient reach. I put the thought away because I had no way to act on it yet, and because I had seen Earl Calloway come down the museum steps approximately thirty seconds ahead of me.

He walked without hurry, hands in his coat pockets, the Stetson level, at the easy pace of a man with a destination and no particular need to appear to have one. I fell in at a distance. He turned along Kingsway, then down into the Strand, moving with the indifference of a man who either did not believe he was being followed or found it a manageable inconvenience. I could not decide which was less reassuring.

He turned off into Salisbury Square—that quiet, slightly bypassed pocket between the Strand and the river where people go when they want to be somewhere that is not quite anywhere. I

slowed at the entrance, then came around the corner at a cautious angle.

He had stopped. A woman was crossing the square towards him, and at a certain point of shared recognition they adjusted their pace—neither quickening nor slowing, but converging in a way that meant arrangement rather than coincidence.

Something in her movement stopped me where I stood.

She said something as they came together. He answered, inclining his head. They turned and walked in the same direction, close enough for conversation, and I cut across the square at a diagonal that would bring me past them at a short distance.

I did not manage this as unobtrusively as I had intended. They were perhaps four metres away when she turned and looked—a single, unhurried glance—and I found myself, for the third time and no less unprepared for it, looking into those extraordinary violet eyes.

A moment of complete stillness among the three of us. Calloway, without turning his head towards me, said something quiet to her. They continued walking without breaking stride, and I stood in the middle of Salisbury Square and watched them move away along the pavement.

I stood there for longer than I needed to. The implications were settling themselves into order. Two first-class tickets. A woman who had known about the threat against Marchmont from a source outside the Hashishin, a source she said was actively opposed to them. An international acquisitions criminal with a professional eye on the slipper in its case. The third party was

not a theory anymore. I had just watched it walk away from me along the Strand.

And I had not told Renshaw. Had not told him after the first meeting in Fleet Street, had not told him after the hotel encounter, had not told him an hour ago when the two tickets made the connection obvious. I had made a promise and I had kept it, and keeping it was now costing considerably more than I had calculated when I made it.

I turned back towards the museum without entirely deciding to. There is a gravitational pull about a place where several things are converging, and the British Antiquarian Museum was currently the convergence point of everything that had been happening for the past several weeks. I found myself in Great Orchard Street, which runs along the western face of the building, without having chosen it as a route.

I was perhaps forty metres along it when I noticed the two men in the doorway on the opposite side of the street.

They were standing in the recessed entrance of a building across from the museum, in the shadow of the door frame, looking upward at the first-floor windows. The quality of their stillness was by now familiar to me: not the stillness of people waiting for something, but the stillness of people who have been in the same position for a long time and intend to be in it for longer. They were not watching the street. They were watching the Layard Room windows.

I recognised the taller of the two. He had been in the museum an hour before, listening to Charlton's security briefing

from across the room, and had left without the door officer registering his departure.

The other was Yusuf of Aleppo.

He was in European clothes—a dark coat, the green turban of a sharif above the collar—and he was looking up at the museum with an expression I could not read clearly from that distance but which I did not need to read. I knew what he was doing. He was looking at where the slipper was, through the walls of a building that had been designed to be impregnable, and was thinking about how to get to it. He had been thinking about it since Mecca, or wherever it was that Marchmont had taken it, and he had not stopped thinking about it.

I had my phone in my hand. Renshaw was inside the museum. I had his number.

I did not call him.

I have thought about this since, at some length. I had every reason to act: the number was there, the certainty was there, the case was plain. Yusuf of Aleppo had been responsible for four mutilations and one death in the course of reaching this street corner, and here he stood in the open at half past three on a December afternoon, and I stood forty metres from him with Renshaw in my recent calls and did nothing at all.

What I was conscious of, standing there on the pavement, was the same quality that had rooted me to the spot in my own study: something that bypassed the reasoning of the situation entirely and engaged something older and considerably less rational. The quality of a man who has never needed the world to be different

from what he believes it to be, and has consequently never found it so. It was not fear, precisely. It was the feeling of standing at the edge of a framework that operates by different rules from the ones you have spent your life inside, and understanding that calling Renshaw would not change that framework at all.

They remained for perhaps five more minutes, looking up at the windows in silence. Then they walked away together towards Kingsway, unhurried, not looking back, and I watched them until the street absorbed them, and then I stood there for another minute watching the empty pavement where they had been.

I went into the museum and found Renshaw in the Layard Room with the CCTV logs on his laptop screen.

"There is something you should know," I said. "Yusuf of Aleppo was in Great Orchard Street twenty minutes ago. He and another man were watching the museum from a doorway. I recognised the second one—he was in this room during the viewing."

Renshaw looked at me for a moment. "You saw them from the street."

"Yes."

"And you are telling me this now."

There was a quality in the way he said it that told me he had noticed the gap between the event and the report. I let the observation sit between us without answering it, which was itself a kind of answer.

"Right," he said, and reached for his phone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE HASHISHIN WATCH

The CCTV review was not conclusive. Renshaw told me this the following morning in three words, and added nothing to them, which was itself informative. The footage showed the blind intact on every viewing day for the previous three weeks and then showed it coming down. Whoever had applied a blade to the fabric had done so in a portion of the frame the westward camera did not cover well, during a period when the room had been sufficiently busy that the gap in sightlines was unremarkable. The archive had been checked back to the day the room opened. Nothing.

I spent the morning catching up on the work that had accumulated. In the early afternoon I was walking down the Strand towards a meeting at *The Meridian's* London office when I saw her.

She was perhaps thirty metres ahead of me, moving at a pace that was not quite hurrying. In the same moment I registered who it was she turned her head—not the idle turn of someone checking the road, but the specific turn of someone who has been aware of a following presence and has decided to confirm it. She saw me.

She did not stop. She did not look away. She simply turned back to her direction and increased her pace by a calculated amount, and by the time I had covered the thirty metres she had turned off somewhere. The Strand at that hour had enough people in it to make recovery impossible, and I knew from previous experience that she was very good at this.

I stood for a moment on the pavement, looking at the space she had occupied, then continued to my meeting. She had been heading somewhere specific. She had seen me and diverted. Somewhere between those two facts and the figure of Calloway in Salisbury Square two days before, there was an increasingly legible picture. I had not yet decided what to do about it.

Renshaw called in the late afternoon. We met at a café on the Embankment at five o'clock, in the cold coming off the river.

"Calloway," he said, sitting down, with the manner of a man who has found one solid thing in a situation that has been giving him nothing solid for weeks. "Charlton's house connects to the museum building through an internal door—he lives in the attached property. The garden behind it backs onto a service lane. I have had officers in the lane since the day after the museum viewing." He took out his phone and showed me a photograph: a small silver object lying between stones.

"Half a cuff link," I said.

"Caught in a gap where the lane wall's mortar has come away. American manufacture—there's a jeweller on Madison Avenue, New York, who uses this particular setting style. I had it confirmed this morning."

"You can't prove it's Calloway's."

"No. But I can't think of anyone else it might belong to, and I can't think of a reason for an American art criminal to be in a service lane behind a museum unless he's assessing the building." He put the phone away. "He has been more active in the vicinity than I realised. Which means the two tickets are not

aspirational—they're a deadline. He intends to move, and he intends to move before that flight."

We sat with this for a moment. The river moved past outside the window, grey and indifferent.

"The night watch," I said.

"Tonight. Charlton is in—he insists on it and frankly I want his knowledge of the building. I have three officers placed outside, none of them visible from the museum windows. I want the exterior to look unguarded." He looked at me steadily. "The conditions should appear as close as possible to an opportunity. If they are watching—and Yusuf in Orchard Street confirms they are—I want them to see what they expect to see."

"The blind."

"Left as it is. No replacement fitted. If their method depends on that opening, I want it available to them." He drained his cup. "They have been ahead of me at every point. Dulwich, the transit of the slipper, the museum. Tonight I want to understand their method before I act on it. I want to see the thing, Brennan, not just its aftermath."

I agreed to be at the museum at nine.

Charlton let us in through the internal connection from his house, so that the museum's public face remained dark. He moved through the building in the way of a man who knows every room in the dark, which I supposed after twenty years he literally did. He led us to the Assyrian Gallery and positioned us without any unnecessary instruction: himself near the door communicating with the Layard Room, Renshaw further along the gallery with a clear

view of both the door and the corridor towards the entrance hall, and me in the recess behind a large carved relief near the western wall.

The Assyrian Gallery in the absence of light was not an entirely comfortable place to wait. The great stone figures that lined the walls acquired in darkness a quality they did not have by day—not sinister in any definable way, but present. As if the dark had returned to them some weight that the lights had diluted. I sat in my recess and did not look at them directly, and thought about what Renshaw intended to do when whatever came through the Layard Room window had declared its method.

We had been in position for a little over two hours—it was approaching one in the morning—when nothing happened, for a long time, and then continued not to happen, and the silence of the museum went from the ordinary silence of a closed building to something rather more concentrated.

I found myself thinking about the woman with the violet eyes. The meeting in the Strand today confirmed she was still in London. She was still connected to whatever Calloway was planning. And I was still, as I had been for weeks, saying nothing about her to the man sitting ten metres from me in the dark who was trying to protect both the slipper and the people associated with it.

I had been on the point of finally telling Renshaw about her—of acknowledging that the promise had cost more than it was worth and that information of this kind belonged with the police—when Charlton, very quietly, touched my arm.

From the Layard Room, through the closed communicating door, there was a sound.

Not a footstep. Not a voice. A sound that was more like the absence of the particular silence that had been there before: as if the room had acquired an occupant without the occupant having entered.

Renshaw had not moved. In the darkness I could make out that he was upright and absolutely still, facing the door. Charlton had his hand on the door handle.

We waited.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE WHITE BEAM

The sound resolved slowly into something that was not quite a sound—more like the quality of the air in the Layard Room had changed, as if the space had rearranged itself around something it had acquired. I thought of the fifth chapter of *Assyrian Mythology*, the footnote about operatives who do not hide but simply stop, and I thought of the crate in Marchmont's study, and I stayed very still.

Renshaw eased the communicating door open by a centimetre, then two, then held it.

Through the gap, the Layard Room showed as a rectangle of darkness somewhat less absolute than the gallery behind us. The barred windows were faint greys in the walls. The case at the centre was a shape among shapes.

Then, at the westward window—the blind with the hole—a thin beam of light entered.

Not moonlight. A fine, cold line of red, no wider than a finger, entering through the prepared gap and falling at a precise angle across the room's dark air, landing with a surveyor's accuracy on the glass lid of the case containing the slipper.

Renshaw did not move.

The beam held its position. I could hear nothing—no sound from the roof above, no impact, no mechanism. Only the museum's

deep closed silence, and in it that red line lying across the case like a mark already made.

Then something came through the barred window.

Not a person. An extension—a flexible arm, dark, no thicker than a baton, feeding itself through the gap between two bars with a fluid, almost organic ease. It followed the beam exactly, tracking the red line towards the case, and at its end was a clutch of some kind: three articulated fingers, open, advancing along the beam's path towards the glass lid.

Charlton, behind me, made no sound. Renshaw was a silhouette in the doorway, absolutely still.

The device reached the case. The clutch closed on the glass lid.

Renshaw went through the door.

He crossed the Layard Room in four strides, hit the light switch at the far wall, and the room went from nothing to full light simultaneously, and in that instant I saw everything: the beam gone, the case under the clutch device, the three fingers gripping the glass lid—and then, with a speed I would not have believed if I had not been watching it, the device withdrawing, the arm snaking back towards the bars, the cord it rode singing taut as it was hauled from the roof above.

A hard crack: the glass lid of the case broke as the clutch caught its edge on the way out. The slipper, displaced by the impact, fell against the inner face of the broken glass and lay there.

"Don't touch it," Renshaw said, already at the window.

I was beside him. Charlton came in behind us.

Renshaw pulled the blind up fully. The barred west window: all four bars in their housings, solid, undamaged, the external face of the glass unmarked. He ran his hand along each bar. Nothing bent, nothing cut. On the outer sill, between the bars, a smear of something dark that the lamplight caught as it caught blood.

He looked upward through the bars. The building's roof edge was a black horizontal against the slightly lighter sky. Nothing on it. Nothing moving anywhere.

"He was there thirty seconds ago," Renshaw said. "The cord went vertically from the bars to the roof. He fed the device down along the beam." He pulled back from the window and looked at me. "He had the whole operation planned to a few seconds. The beam through the blind shows him the case in the dark from the roof. The device follows the beam to the lid. The clutch opens the case. He hauls the slipper up on the cord." He stopped.

"And we turned the lights on," I said.

"We turned the lights on."

He went to the east-facing windows and looked down into the street below. I joined him. On the pavement two floors down, in the amber wash of the streetlights, something lay that had not been there when we arrived: a length of dark cord, loosely piled, and at one end the clutch device, its three fingers slightly open, as if releasing something it had been holding.

The cord and the device were wet in the lamplight. Not with rain.

We went down. Renshaw was on his radio as we moved. The constable stationed on the north corner reached the device the same moment I did, and we crouched over it without touching it, looking at the cord and the clutch and the way the blood had travelled along the cord from wherever the source was, and I was trying to work out what it meant—whether the cord had been cut deliberately from above, or dropped in urgency, or whether something had happened on the roof that nobody had planned for—when from the direction of the square beyond the museum's east face a sound came.

Brief. A single sharp exhalation, rising. Cut off.

Then nothing.

I straightened up. The constable looked at me. Renshaw was already moving towards the square, and we went after him.

The square was empty. We stood in the middle of it and looked at empty pavements and a closed garden and the dark facades of the surrounding buildings, and Renshaw made two calls in rapid succession, and then he came back to where I was standing and looked at the pavement and said nothing for a moment.

"The slipper," I said.

"Still in the case. Not taken." He said it in the tone of a man who is not yet sure whether this is a good outcome or simply an outcome. "Something happened on that roof before the operation was completed. The cord was dropped rather than lowered. The device was abandoned." He turned back towards the museum. "The scream came from this square."

We found nothing in the square or in the streets around it. The camera footage from the area—which Renshaw pulled within twenty minutes on his phone from the network his team had access to—showed a figure on the roof moving too fast and in too little available light to be identifiable. It showed the figure, briefly, and then it did not show the figure, and then the cord fell.

I went back inside with Charlton. The slipper lay in the broken case, untouched. The red dot of the laser, extinguished when Renshaw hit the lights, was gone, but the hole in the pulled-up blind was still precisely there: a clean rectangle, cut with care, at exactly the height required.

"He will try again," Charlton said.

"Yes," I said. "But something happened tonight that he didn't plan for."

Charlton looked at the bloodied cord in the evidence bag on the floor. "Whose blood?"

I had been thinking about that since the moment the cord fell. Two first-class tickets. A Stetson hat and a right arm held slightly close to the body. A cuff link in the lane behind the curator's house. An American art criminal who had been assessing this room since the day the slipper arrived in it.

"I think," I said carefully, "that Earl Calloway may have had a very bad night."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A SCREAM IN THE NIGHT

We were in the square at first light. The December dark came away slowly, and as it did the square gave up what little it had: a blood trail—not heavy, but unmistakable—leading from a point near the east railings to the street beyond, where it stopped. Someone had reached the street. Someone had had transport waiting. The blood was fresh enough to confirm last night; not fresh enough to help more than that.

Renshaw had the scene sealed before sunrise. Officers were on the roof of the museum building within an hour, and they found what he had expected to find: a point of access at the south-west corner where the gutterway of the adjacent building had been used as a descent route, and in the lead of the gutter, two sets of scuff marks that he photographed and measured in silence. Two different visits. The same route.

"He came back," I said.

"After we went downstairs to look at the cord," Renshaw said. "While we were in the square. He must have had ten minutes." He stood at the gutter's edge looking down at the street, and I stood beside him, and neither of us said anything further for a moment because the plain fact of it was sufficient. We had been thirty metres away and he had used the time.

The cord and the clutch device went to the laboratory. The blood was human, AB positive, and Renshaw put it into Calloway's file with the note *unconfirmed, pending DNA*, and then he arranged

for the case to be repaired and a new blind to be fitted in the Layard Room and the slipper to be returned to the case using forensic tools, without direct contact by anyone. We were, by now, all acutely aware of the implications of touching it.

The room reopened to the public two days later. The new blind was in place. The barred windows were intact. The case was intact. The slipper sat in it, and the visitors who came to see it stood at the rail and looked at the fragment of ancient leather and went away again, largely unmoved, which was their privilege.

Renshaw and I maintained the watch in the Assyrian Gallery for three more nights without incident. On the fourth day Renshaw said he thought Calloway was reorganising, and on the fourth night we were in our positions again when, at twenty past one in the morning, something came through the new blind.

Not the laser this time. The blind was simply pushed aside by something thin and rigid inserted at its lower edge, and through the gap came a glass cutter's tool—a single sharp point on a handle—which scored a circle in the lower pane of the west window in about four seconds, tapped it once, and removed the disc of glass with a suction attachment.

Through the opening came the same clutch device, the same flexible arm, moving more rapidly this time, following no beam but finding the case from memory or from prior measurement, which amounted to the same thing.

Renshaw was through the communicating door before the device reached the case. The lights came on. The device reached the case anyway.

It operated the lock—not the lid this time, the actual locking mechanism—with a precision that told me a great deal about the intervening days. The lock turned. The lid opened. The clutch went in.

Renshaw was at the window with his hands on the bars.

The clutch came back out with the slipper. An ancient fragment of moroccan leather, carried upward on a cord through a circular gap in a museum window while a Detective Inspector stood forty centimetres away with his hands on iron bars that had not moved in a hundred and twenty years, utterly unable to stop it.

The cord went taut. The slipper went up. Then the cord slackened and was drawn upward and was gone.

Renshaw turned from the window and looked at me. His expression was the most controlled thing I had seen in a face for a long time.

"The roof," he said.

We were moving before he finished saying it. Down the gallery, down the stairs, out through Charlton's house to the street, around the building's north face to the square beyond the east windows. The constable on the north corner was already running. From the square, very clearly, coming from the direction of the south-east corner of the museum building where the ivy grew thick up the adjacent house, came a sound.

It rose. It was the sound of someone undergoing something involuntary—a sound that rises because the body insists on it regardless of what the will intends. It fell. Then silence.

We went into the square.

The ivy on the adjacent house had been recently disturbed—a fresh pale scar in the dark growth where something had come down it quickly. At the base of the building, on the pavement, a rope arrangement lay in a heap: knotted at intervals, rigged to a hook that had been over the gutterway and was now free of it.

Beyond the rope, closer to the square's central garden, lay the cord and the clutch device. Beside them, in a dark pool that caught the nearest streetlight, something else.

I will not describe it at length. I will say that it was a human hand, severed above the wrist with a single clean cut, and that it was still holding the clutch device. And I will say—because it matters, and because it is the point of it—that on the ring finger of that hand was a large opal stone in a gold setting, and that around the wrist, just below the line of the cut, was a small adhesive dressing over a healing wound of the kind a man might sustain catching his hand on a broken bar at night.

Renshaw crouched over it without touching it. He straightened up after a moment. Behind me, Charlton had arrived, breathing audibly from the run.

"The opal ring," I said.

"It is in Interpol's file," Renshaw said. "Calloway always wore it." He looked at the rope arrangement, then at the ivy

marks, then at the top of the building where the gutterway ran. "He was coming down when they caught him. He was nearly at the bottom." He paused. "The slipper was already above him on the rope."

"So he had it."

"He had it. And the Hashishin were waiting—here, or near here, watching him come down. They took his hand as he reached the ground." He looked at the dark pool. "And then he ran. With one hand. Into whatever transport was waiting."

"With the slipper?"

Renshaw stood in the December cold of the square and looked at the empty street and at the ivy and at the rope on the pavement.

"That," he said, "is the question." He reached for his phone. "The slipper was on the rope above him when they caught him. He ran without it. Or he ran with it. Or the Hashishin took it first and then took his hand. Or he had already lowered it to someone else." He looked at me directly. "I don't know, Brennan. I genuinely don't know which of them has it."

Charlton, very quietly, said: "If the Hashishin have it, they will leave. Tonight, or tomorrow. And it is over."

"Yes," Renshaw said.

"And if Calloway has it?"

Renshaw put his phone to his ear and looked at the hand of Earl Calloway lying in the square of a London museum at two in the morning, still holding the instrument of its own undoing.

"If Calloway has it," he said, "then God help Earl Calloway."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A SHRIVELLED HAND

The story was on the morning news by six: *Severed hand found near museum in late-night incident*. No mention of the slipper—Renshaw had managed that, at least. The CCTV from the museum's exterior had been secured before any press inquiry reached the relevant office. The ivy marks on the adjacent building, the rope hook's impression in the gutterway lead, the blood trail across the square: all of it contained, with the fragility that attends containment when thirty officers have been active in central London through the night.

I arrived at Scotland Yard at nine. Renshaw was already in the conference room with Detective Superintendent Carver, who had been managing the investigation's administrative side throughout and who received me with the courtesy of a man who has read everything and would have preferred to receive rather more of it directly from a primary source.

An evidence photograph of the hand sat on the table between us: clinical, precisely framed, the opal ring legible in the image. Carver went through the case from the beginning with the methodical patience of someone preparing to explain it upward. His superiors were going to have questions. The answers needed to be coherent.

When he had finished, Renshaw spoke. He covered the overnight sequence in four minutes—the second entry, the lock rather than the lid, the cord and clutch, the slipper gone, the

hand in the square—in the way he delivers facts that are already doing everything emphasis could add.

"The DNA will confirm it's Calloway," Carver said. "The ring already has—it matches the jewellery recorded in his Interpol file precisely. So: Calloway was on that roof, Calloway has lost his right hand, and the slipper is gone from the museum." He looked at the photograph. "The remaining question is whether the slipper left with him or with the Hashishin."

"If the Hashishin have recovered it," Renshaw said, "we should expect them to leave. Yusuf of Aleppo has been in this country for several weeks at significant personal risk. His sole purpose was the slipper. If he has it, there is nothing to keep him here."

"And if Calloway has it?"

"Calloway has lost his right hand and is almost certainly in medical crisis somewhere in this city. He had transport—the blood trail ends at the street, not in it—but transport takes you only as far as the next decision, and the next decision is a surgeon." Renshaw glanced at me. "Every hospital and clinic in the Metropolitan area has his description and photograph. Every port and airport has had notification since four this morning. If he's here and seeks medical attention, we find him."

"And if he doesn't seek it?"

Renshaw said nothing for a moment. "Then it depends on who is with him," he said.

Carver looked at me with the expression of a senior officer looking at a civilian who has been present throughout a sensitive

investigation and whose full cooperation he has been assured of but not entirely felt.

"Mr. Brennan," he said. "You have been considerably closer to this than most civilians ever get. Is there anything you are aware of that has not found its way into Inspector Renshaw's reports?"

The question sat in the room. I was aware, with a clarity that had been building for weeks, of exactly how much the honest answer was yes. The woman with the violet eyes. Three meetings. Salisbury Square and the two first-class tickets. Her source who was opposed to the Hashishin—which was now plainly Calloway, which made her either Calloway's partner or someone in proximity to him—and my promise, maintained through the death of a man and the mutilation of others, that I would say nothing about her visit.

"I have provided everything material to Inspector Renshaw directly," I said.

Carver accepted this at face value and moved on. It was technically accurate and materially evasive and I was aware of both things simultaneously as I said it.

The rest of the meeting covered operational matters: the watch on the museum to be maintained, the European alert to be upgraded, the press line to be managed. I contributed nothing further. At eleven we came out into the corridor together, Renshaw and I, and walked to the lift in silence.

In the lift he pressed the ground floor button and stood with his hands in his pockets, looking at the middle distance.

"Anything you know that isn't in my reports," he said.

Not a question. I said nothing. The doors opened.

We came out onto the Victoria Embankment. The river was flat and grey between the buildings, moving without urgency. Renshaw stood with his collar turned up against the cold.

"I think Calloway has the slipper," he said. "I think the Hashishin caught him on the ivy and took his hand, and he ran anyway, because the slipper was the only thing he had left that was worth running for. A man audacious enough to go back up on that roof four nights after losing his grip on the cord is not a man who abandons the operation at the last step." He paused. "But a man with a freshly severed wrist does not survive a week without someone who knows what they're doing."

"Someone who has been close enough to this situation to understand the medical risk," I said. I chose the words carefully, conscious of choosing them. "Who knew him well enough to be in position when he needed it."

Renshaw looked at me sideways. The look had the quality of a man filing something away rather than acting on it immediately.

"Yes," he said. "Exactly that."

A bus went past. Somewhere upriver a siren started and faded. The city conducted its vast indifferent business around us.

"I'll be in touch," Renshaw said, and went back inside.

I stood on the Embankment for a while, watching the river and thinking about the conversation I had just failed to have, for the fourth time, with a man who was increasingly aware that I

was failing to have it. I thought about two first-class tickets that had never been used. I thought about an American in a hotel room somewhere in London who had just survived something that should have killed him, and about a woman with violet eyes who had told me, the first time I met her, that she could not dare to say more.

She had been protecting him then. She was protecting him now. That much, at least, was clear.

What was less clear was what I intended to do about it, and how much longer I could sustain the fiction that the answer was nothing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
CARDEW'S BUILDINGS

A week passed, and then another. The news cycle moved on to other things. The museum issued a brief statement about a security incident and confirmed that the relevant display case was temporarily empty. No further details were released, and the press, finding nothing new to report, found other things to report instead.

The Hashishin, apparently, had lost interest in me. This was the logical consequence of my situation: I held keys to an empty case, and an empty case is only interesting to someone who expects it to be filled again. Whether that expected event was imminent was a question I could not answer, and the uncertainty of it sat with me in the flat with the low, steady presence of something that has decided to wait.

I tried to work. My editor at *The Meridian* was patient, which I suspected meant he already knew more about my current situation than I had told him. I filed two pieces and began a third and abandoned it. I read most of *Assyrian Mythology* twice. I thought about the woman with the violet eyes and about the conversation I had not had on the Victoria Embankment, and I made and unmade the decision to call Renshaw about her so many times that making and unmaking it became its own habit, a daily ritual of inaction dressed up as deliberation.

Renshaw called me on a Tuesday evening in the third week of December.

"A development," he said, without preamble. "I don't know what to make of it yet. Can you come to Waterloo Road now?"

"What sort of development?"

"The sort that requires you to see it," he said. "I'll meet you outside Cardew's Buildings. Do you know it?"

I did not. He described it: a block of flats on the Waterloo Road, post-war concrete, one of the buildings that the redevelopment of the South Bank had bypassed for reasons that were probably financial and felt almost deliberate. I took the Tube to Waterloo and walked south, and found the block where he had described it—a grim rectangular thing behind a low wall, its courtyard lit by a single lamp that was doing its best against the dark.

There were four police vehicles in the road outside, and a small gathering of residents at the gate who had the look of people who had been asked to stay back and had decided to stay back while making their displeasure about it clearly audible. Renshaw met me at the entrance to the courtyard, where a uniformed officer had been positioned to manage exactly this kind of traffic.

We went in.

A Hashishin operative lay on the concrete of the courtyard. I knew what they were as soon as I saw them—not because of anything specific about their appearance but because of the quality of their gear, the particular compactness of their build, and the way they lay: the fall of a person who had been somewhere high and had come down suddenly, without the reaching out that

instinct produces in a person who knows they are falling. They had not known. It had been very fast.

There was a single entry wound, consistent with a small-calibre firearm, behind the right ear. The fall had done the rest.

"Nobody heard the shot," Renshaw said. "Or nobody will say they did. We have three witnesses who say they heard something that might have been a shot or might have been a car backfiring, and none of them can agree on the direction." He looked up at the surrounding faces of the block's windows, most of them lit now, many with faces in them. "What they all agree on is that they heard the body land. And when they looked, there was nobody else in the courtyard."

"Where did they fall from?"

"That," said Renshaw, "is what I need to show you."

We went up through the block—a stairwell that smelled of decades of close habitation—to the roof access, which had been left open in the way that roof accesses are left open when someone has been through them recently and in a hurry. On the roof, Renshaw led me to the south parapet and pointed.

Below us was the courtyard. Behind us was the building. Beyond the building's south face was a narrow service lane, and beyond the lane was another block, roughly the same height, with scaffolding on its south-facing wall. The scaffolding extended upward two floors above the roofline, clamped to the structure, its poles carrying several temporary cable runs of the kind that site electricians string between towers.

One of those cables ran, at roughly roof level, across the service lane and was fixed at this end to a clamp on the parapet where we were standing. I had not noticed it in the dark when we came out. Renshaw put his torch on it.

The cable was perhaps forty metres long and perhaps three centimetres in diameter—a temporary power cable, the kind used on construction sites. At its near end, where it met the clamp on the parapet, there was a scuff mark in the rust on the clamp's surface. New, pale against the old oxidation.

"Someone came across this cable from the scaffolding," Renshaw said. "Hand over hand, in the dark, at roof height. And someone—from somewhere—shot them while they were on it. They fell. The cable is forty metres; the body landed roughly fifteen metres out from this building, in the middle of the courtyard, which is consistent with falling from somewhere along the mid-point of the run."

I stood at the parapet looking at the cable and at the courtyard below and at the scaffolding on the far building, and I thought about what Marchmont had written about the Hashishin's training, and about the operatives' ability to traverse spaces that should be impossible to traverse. Hand over hand, forty metres, three storeys up, in December dark.

"And the shot came from the scaffolding direction?" I said.

"From the south. That's the most useful thing I can get from the three witnesses who heard anything." He turned and looked across the service lane towards the scaffolded building. "The shot was fired from the south. The operative was travelling from

south to north—from the scaffolded building towards this one." He paused. "They were shot from behind. Whoever fired was on the scaffolding, or in the building behind it, between the operative and wherever they were coming from."

I looked at the scaffolded building. Five floors, perhaps six. Scaffolding on the south face covering about three floors of the structure. Behind its bars and boards, several windows were dark.

"The operative was coming from that building," I said. "Or was heading towards it."

"Or both," Renshaw said. "Reconnaissance. Having a look at something. Or someone." He looked at me steadily. "The Hashishin are not in Waterloo Road for the pleasure of it, Brennan. If one of them was crossing between those two buildings in the middle of the night, there is one reason. The slipper is here. Or nearby."

I looked again at the scaffolded building. A flat on the fourth floor had a light in it—just visible behind boards and a dark curtain. It had been there when we came out and was still there: the steady, inhabited light of a room in use.

"Or the person who has the slipper is here," I said.

Renshaw followed my look. He stood at the parapet for a moment, studying the lit window.

"Yes," he said. "That's the other way to put it."

We stayed on the roof for a while longer in the cold, looking at the building and the scaffolding and the cable and the dark courtyard below where the operative lay, and I thought about a man who had lost his right hand on a museum roof three weeks

ago and who, according to every hospital and clinic in the Metropolitan area, had not sought medical attention. And about the particular kind of help that would allow a man to survive that without seeking it.

And about who, in all of this, had the steadiest hands.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE WOMAN WITH THE BASKET

I left the rooftop of Cardew's Buildings at half past midnight, having given a statement and become, in the estimation of the forensics team, surplus to requirements. Renshaw had things well in hand; my continued presence was more a function of not wanting to be away from the investigation than of any practical use I could offer. I walked north towards the bridge.

The Waterloo Road at that hour had enough foot traffic to feel inhabited and not quite enough to feel easy: the late-night pubs thinning, the occasional pedestrian moving with the purposeful pace of someone focused on their destination. I walked with my collar up and thought about the lit window on the fourth floor of the scaffolded building and about what it cost, three weeks after losing your right hand, to be still in a room in London with the thing you had taken.

I was passing the mouth of a narrow service lane—one of those half-lanes that the city seems to require between its larger roads, as if London maintains a permanent need for places that are not quite anywhere—when I heard it.

Not a scream. Something more controlled: a woman's voice saying no with the particular compression of someone not yet panicking but extremely close to it. Then the sound of a bag being grabbed at.

I went in.

The lane was poorly lit and about twenty metres long. A woman in a dark coat and a hat pulled low was pressed against the wall. An operative—I knew the type by now, by the particular economy of their movements, the professional stillness—had her cornered. He was not shouting. Not rushing. Going about it with the quiet efficiency of someone who has done this before and expects to do it without incident.

I did not have a weapon. I had a phone. In the brief interval before the operative registered my arrival I raised it to my ear and said, loudly and with the confidence of someone who has called the right number: "Yes, I can see him—the service lane off Waterloo Road, he's got a woman—yes, stay on the line, I'm right here."

The operative turned. The look that crossed his face was the fast, impersonal calculation of a professional reassessing an equation. He looked at me. He looked at the phone. He looked at the woman. Then he walked away, quickly, towards the far end of the lane, and was gone.

The woman straightened her coat with the composed efficiency of someone for whom composure at difficult moments is a practised condition. Her shopping bag had been knocked from her arm; she crouched to retrieve what had spilled from it—a bottle of wine, a brown-paper parcel—replaced them without hurrying, and rose.

Then she walked past me, towards the main road.

"Are you all right?" I said.

"Perfectly," she said, without looking back.

It was the composure that held me a beat too long. By the time I reached the street she was forty metres ahead, walking at the efficient pace of someone covering distance without appearing to. I crossed the road and fell in behind her at a distance.

What had given her away was the shopping bag. I had caught a clear view of its contents when she knelt to retrieve what had fallen: the wine was a good Burgundy, label from an independent merchant in Borough Market; the brown-paper parcel was from an artisan bakery on Lower Marsh whose bread is not cheap. The coat was old, the hat unremarkable, the shoes as sensibly drab as possible—a convincing picture of a woman of no particular consequence on a late errand. But the provisions did not match the disguise. Someone, somewhere, was eating and drinking rather well.

She paused at a bus stop. I walked past her on the opposite side of the road, continued twenty metres, and watched from a shop doorway.

A night bus came. She got on. I found an Uber three streets over and directed the driver to follow the bus's route at a gap of two stops. He looked at me in the mirror. I said nothing and he said nothing, which suited us both.

She got off earlier than the route would have taken her. I watched from the car as she descended and stood on the pavement for a moment—adjusting the bag, apparently checking her phone, orienting herself. A woman with nowhere particular to be, pausing naturally. I had done enough surveillance work as a journalist to recognise someone who was checking whether they were being

followed, and I had done enough to know that the check, if routine, misses someone who has already stopped.

I gave her ninety seconds and got out. I followed on foot, on the far pavement, among the thin late pedestrian traffic.

She led me south from the main road and through two quiet streets towards the service approach behind the scaffolded building I had been studying from the Cardew's Buildings rooftop less than an hour before. The building with the lit window on the fourth floor. I had been looking at it all evening without quite knowing I was looking at it.

I let her go through the entrance, waited, and followed into the hallway. It smelled of old heating and recent cooking. She was already on the stairs, moving upward without a light, at the pace of someone who has made this climb many times in the dark. I waited until she had cleared the first landing and went after her.

She was fast. By the time I reached the fourth-floor landing I heard, from somewhere above the turn of the stairs, the sound of a key being tried in a lock.

I went up the final flight.

At the head of the stairs she stood with her hand on the door of a flat and her face turned towards me. She had heard me, or sensed me, and she was entirely still, with the quality of stillness that belongs to a person who has decided not to run.

The hat was still on. The old coat was the same. But the face beneath the hat was turned fully towards me, and the eyes in

it were not the eyes of the woman the coat and hat belonged to. They were, as they had been every time, unmistakable.

Violet. Precise. The colour of something very deep seen through completely clear water.

We looked at each other in the dim light of the landing. I thought of the Fleet Street courtyard, the hotel lounge, the Strand, Salisbury Square, and the three weeks of silence since then. I thought of what it had cost both of us to reach this staircase.

"I know what's in the bag," I said. "And I know which flat."

She said nothing.

"He's alive," I said. "That's all I actually need to know right now."

Something moved in those extraordinary eyes—not the composure she deployed like armour, and not the calculation I had learned to expect, but something rawer and more honest. The thing that appears in a person's face when they have been managing very carefully for a very long time and someone finally names the exact thing they have been managing.

"Come inside," she said.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHAT CAME THROUGH THE WINDOW

The flat was on the fourth floor at the rear of the building—the window I had seen lit from the rooftop of Cardew's Buildings was now dark because the lamp had been moved to the inner room. What had appeared to be light behind a curtain was in fact light positioned beyond a second doorway, so that only a fraction of it escaped and only from a specific angle. Someone had thought carefully about how much to be visible from the surrounding rooftops.

The main room was almost empty: a folding table, two chairs, a sleeping bag rolled against the wall, a first aid kit of professional scope on the table beside a laptop. The kitchen held the provisions of someone planning medium-term concealment. A washing line was rigged between two wall hooks. The place had the quality of a room that had been deliberately designed to leave very little evidence of its occupant.

Earl Calloway was in the chair nearest the inner door. He had the pallor of a man who has spent three weeks in a room recovering from something, and the sharp watchfulness of a man who has spent those same three weeks unable to afford to stop thinking. His right arm ended in bandages below the elbow, resting on the chair arm with the careful arrangement of something that has ceased to be a hand and not yet settled into being anything else. His left hand held a compact pistol, loosely.

He looked at me without visible surprise.

"Mr. Brennan," he said. The strident, slightly amused drawl I had registered across the Layard Room several weeks ago. "I had a feeling this was coming."

"Mr. Calloway," I said.

Sarelle—she had removed the hat and coat and was herself again in the lamplight, precise and composed—stood near the table. She had already unpacked the wine.

"Sit down," Calloway said.

I sat.

"You found us through her," he said. Not a question. He looked at Sarelle with the expression of a man conducting an accurate post-mortem. "The lane?"

"An operative was following her. I intervened."

He absorbed this. "They've been watching her routes for the past week. We knew it was getting close." He glanced at the bandaged arm. "I'd have changed the arrangement by now if I were in better shape for arrangements."

"You should have left," I said. "Three weeks ago."

"I know," he said, with the good-natured self-awareness of a man who has arrived at this conclusion independently and finds it no less accurate for that. "I have lost the most useful right hand in the Western hemisphere and the cleanest record in my profession over this operation, and I am sitting in a fourth-floor walk-up in Waterloo being converged upon by people who sincerely want me dead. The rational response, yes, was to leave

immediately. But a man with one hand and no viable plan who tries to move makes mistakes, and I cannot afford mistakes."

"And now you have a plan."

"Now I have a plan. And you're part of it, Mr. Brennan, whether that suits you or not—though I'd prefer the version where it suits you, because it functions considerably better that way."

He stated the proposition with the directness of a man accustomed to negotiating against the clock. He had the slipper. He was prepared to return it—to the museum, to the estate, to whatever disposition the relevant parties agreed upon—in exchange for two things: a guarantee of safe passage out of the country for himself and Sarelle, and a fee from the museum for the safe return of a relic it had singularly failed to protect by any means of its own. He named a figure.

"You want immunity and payment," I said, "for returning something you stole."

"I want immunity and payment for returning something I recovered at considerable personal cost from people who are actively trying to kill me, which your Scotland Yard has failed to recover by any other method. That is the value proposition." He looked at me with those watchful, faintly amused eyes. "You'll find it reasonable or you won't. But the alternative is the slipper staying in this room until Yusuf's people close the last exit, at which point everyone loses and nobody is satisfied."

I sat with this for a moment. Then I said: "There's something I need to confirm before we go any further."

He waited.

"The *Khedive Star*," I said. "Port Said to Tilbury. You traveled as Ahmad Nadeem—a Jordanian academic, grey beard, visiting fellowship at the British Institute. I have been trying to place you since I saw you in the Layard Room three weeks ago." I watched his face. "I placed you approximately five minutes ago on that staircase."

A pause. Something moved in his expression—not embarrassment, which I doubted was a register he used, but something more like genuine respect for a piece of observation that had taken longer than it should have.

"The beard," he said, "is the only disguise I have ever used. I dislike them as a rule. This one was necessary." He glanced at Sarelle. "We were in Cairo when we learned what Marchmont had done. I needed to be on that ship. I needed to understand what had been taken and where it was going." He looked back at me. "You were the most useful journalist aboard."

"You were watching Marchmont through me."

"I was watching everything through everything available. You asked the right questions and happened to be going to the same place I was going." He paused. "I've had worse working arrangements."

I thought about the voyage. Nadeem at the rail, the careful conversations, the quality of his reticence. The moment at Tilbury that I had thought was something passing from one of Yusuf's party to a neutral observer. It had been Calloway—in beard, in character—receiving a communication from a source inside the Azraeel group: someone who had been told what to look

for in Marchmont's luggage, and who had confirmed what Calloway needed to know.

"Tilbury," I said. "The handoff."

"A pay-as-you-go phone. Wiped. It confirmed the solicitor's name and the location of the safe." He shifted slightly in the chair, adjusting the bandaged arm. "I did not arrange Marchmont's death, Mr. Brennan. I want that stated clearly. I wanted the slipper. I had no interest in the man's death and no hand in it."

He said it with the directness of someone stating a fact rather than mounting a defence. I believed him. I am not certain I was right to, but I believed him.

Sarelle set a glass of wine on the table between us and said, very quietly: "We need to move."

Calloway looked at her.

"Outside," she said. "Something's changed."

What followed took less than two minutes. Sarelle found a length of cord in the kitchen and bound my wrists behind me with a speed and precision that spoke of practice—quickly, cleanly, not too tight. She held my coat as I stood. "I'm sorry," she said, and the apology was genuine, which made it simultaneously better and worse. Calloway put the coat on over his bandaged arm, adjusting it one-handed with the resigned efficiency of a man who has been adapting to one hand for three weeks and has stopped being surprised by what it requires.

He paused in the doorway.

"Tell Renshaw I'll be in touch," he said. "The fee is non-negotiable; the mechanism is open for discussion. And tell him

the ship's name was the *Khedive Star* if he needs confirmation it's me talking—he'll understand why that matters." He looked at me for a moment with the steady, slightly amused appraisal that seemed to be his default position on the world. "You've been fair with this, Mr. Brennan. Considering."

They were gone.

I stood in the empty flat with my wrists bound and listened. The flat was silent. After a moment I moved to the window—awkwardly, without hands—and looked through the gap in the curtain.

The scaffolding on the building's south face was close enough to touch through the glass. In the narrow dark between two scaffold boards, about two metres below the window ledge, something was moving. The slow, deliberate upward progress of something that has been climbing patiently in the dark and is not in a hurry because it is nearly there.

I stepped back from the glass.

The window latch gave a single soft click.

Renshaw's team put the door down six minutes later. They came in fast and went straight to the windows, and found, as I had found two minutes earlier, that the scaffolding was empty in both directions. Whoever had been there had gone, with the noiseless completeness that had become, over the past several weeks, their most reliable characteristic.

"The scaffolding," I said to Renshaw, who was through the door immediately behind his officers.

He crossed to the window, assessed it, turned back. His eyes took in the cord on the floor where Sarelle had cut it from my wrists, the folding table, the sleeping bag, the first aid kit, the signs of three weeks of careful habitation. He looked at my coat, which was not on my coat hook.

"Tell me everything," he said.

"Yes," I said. "I will."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A RAPPING AT MIDNIGHT

The days after the Waterloo Road flat were among the stranger ones of an already strange few months. I told Renshaw everything, as I had promised, sitting in the empty fourth-floor room while his officers worked the scene around us and he took notes with the focused patience of a man processing several months of omissions at once. He did not make me feel worse about it than I already did. I noted that this was a deliberate choice on his part and appreciated it accordingly.

Calloway's proposition was conveyed through the appropriate channels: to the museum, to Thurlow and Associates as administrators of Marchmont's estate, and through Renshaw to a senior officer whose sign-off would be required for any immunity arrangement. The response was careful. The fee was considered excessive. Calloway was informed through the chain that Brennan had become by default that a further conversation was possible and that the positions on both sides would need to move. This information was received without visible alarm, which told me something about how far Calloway had thought the negotiation through.

Renshaw arranged for a patrol past my building at irregular hours and had the entry system reviewed, which review found it to be somewhat less secure than the management company had represented. This was remedied. I put two new locks on the flat door and moved my desk away from the window and made a deliberate

effort to treat my situation as a professional inconvenience rather than a personal threat, which worked about half the time.

Christmas came and went. The city managed its usual accommodation between festivity and exhaustion. In the second week of the new year I had a brief and unproductive meeting with Thurlow, who was finding the negotiation distasteful on every dimension, and a slightly more productive one with Charlton at the museum, who had reached the point of genuinely not caring about the fee as long as the slipper came back and the case could be closed. His year had been difficult.

On the night of the fourteenth of January I was at my desk past midnight, working on the podcast episode that had been refusing to resolve since Cairo. The material was all there; it was simply that the shape of it kept changing as the events it was supposed to describe continued to occur. I had been at it for three hours and had made the kind of progress that looks like forward movement and is actually revision of what you have already done.

I heard the rapping at approximately twelve-twenty.

It was not the doorbell and it was not a knock. It was the sound of something making the minimum possible contact with a surface while still making contact with it: soft, repeated, muffled at its edges, deliberate. Not impatient. Not urgent. The rapping of something with all the time in the world and a specific intention to be heard only by the person on the other side of the door.

I sat still for a moment, which is what I did now, instinctively, before moving towards any unexpected sound. I had learned this over the autumn in the way one learns things that happen to you repeatedly. I listened. The building was quiet. The courtyard below was quiet. Big Ben, some way to the north, had struck twelve about twenty minutes ago.

The rapping came again. The same quality. Unhurried.

I went into the hall, turned on the hall light, and stood looking at the door. Nothing visible at the frame. No shadow at the threshold. No sound from the landing beyond.

I moved closer.

The rapping stopped. A silence of perhaps forty seconds, and then the letter box flap shifted. Not dramatically: just the slight movement of a flap being raised from outside by a fraction of an inch, and held there.

I reached for my phone on the hall table. I had left it on the desk.

The letter box flap came up another half-inch.

I know, writing this now, exactly what I should have done. I should have gone to the desk, picked up the phone, and called Renshaw from the far end of the flat while the door remained between me and whatever was at it. This is the obvious and sensible response, and it is what I would advise anyone in the same situation to do, and it is not what I did.

What I did was bend towards the opening.

I have thought about this since, more than once, because it continues to surprise me. I am not an incautious person by

nature, and by this point in the autumn I had more specific reasons than most for caution around doors and letter boxes and small apertures through which things could be delivered. And yet. The instinct to look—to know, to bring the uncertain thing into the category of the known—is apparently robust enough to outlast quite a lot of contradictory experience.

I was at letter-box height when something came through.

Not a note. Not anything visible. A fine aerosol mist, concentrated, that reached my face in the moment my face was level with the opening—and that had, before I had consciously registered it as a distinct event, an immediate and comprehensive quality about it. Not pain. Nothing so simple. A pressing warmth behind the eyes and at the base of the skull, the body's advance notice of its intention to stop taking instructions from the mind.

I turned. I made it upright. I had a clear impression of my own hallway—the study lamp casting its light through the open door, the desk with my phone on it, the quite ordinary dimensions of a room I had lived in for three years—and then the hallway began to behave in a way that was inconsistent with those dimensions, and I found myself moving towards the floor without having decided to, and the last thing I was aware of was the carpet, which I had been meaning to replace.

Then nothing.

Then a room I had never seen before, which was not my flat, and which was the colour of something I was not yet in any condition to name.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE GOLDEN PAVILION

What I am about to describe I cannot entirely certify as real. This is not rhetorical preparation: I genuinely do not know, with the confidence I would ordinarily require before reporting something, whether what follows happened to me or was constructed for me by whatever was in the aerosol that came through my letter box at twelve-twenty on a January night. I offer it for what it is worth.

I came back to awareness slowly, through layers of something that was not quite sleep. The first distinct impression was colour.

Yellow. Specifically and insistently yellow. The walls—silk, or something that moved like silk in an air current I could not feel—were yellow. The carpet beneath my palms was yellow, and when I raised my eyes the ceiling was yellow also. Several low tables around the room were made of a pale lemon-coloured wood inlaid with green stones, and from the ceiling hung a lamp of the same wood with openings filled with green glass, and the light it cast was a concentrated, sickly green-yellow that I found, within the first few seconds of observing it, actively distressing.

I tried to sit up. The room swam. I tried again and managed it.

In the far corner a small golden censer exhaled a thin coil of smoke that rose in slow spirals towards the yellow ceiling. I did not need to identify the smell: having encountered it once

before, in circumstances I was still uncertain about, it was immediately recognisable as the heavy, sweet, insistent reek of burning hashish. It was in the air of the room. It was behind my eyes. It was the reason everything I looked at had a slightly uncertain relationship with its own dimensions.

No door was visible. No window. Only the silk and the lamp and the carpet and the tables with their green inlay and the censer with its rising smoke, and yellow and green and gold repeating in every direction until the eye found nothing else to rest on and accepted them as the nature of the world.

I sat on what my hands established was a divan covered in yellow cushions with gold tassels, and I looked at the room, and the room looked back, and the smoke rose, and the hashish was in everything.

The curtain at the far end of the room moved.

A tall figure entered: yellow robes, loose and long, and above them the green turban of a sharif. A white beard trimmed with precision. Aquiline features and eyes that I would have known at any distance in any light.

Yusuf of Aleppo stood in the centre of the yellow room and regarded me with the unhurried attention of a man arriving at an appointment he has long since arranged.

"Mr. Brennan," he said. His English was as faultless as it had been in my study months ago, and in the corridor near Salisbury Square, and in every encounter since. "I have brought you here because I have something to tell you. I wished to say it without interruption."

I said nothing. I was not in any condition to dispute the setting.

"You have been wise," he continued, "in that you have never touched the sacred slipper. Had you done so, no subsequent arrangement would have shielded you from what follows from that. The penalty is not mine to set aside; it belongs to the law of our order, and is older than I am." He moved slightly—not towards me but in the way a man moves when he is arranging his thoughts into sentences. "The light of Al-Madinah is a spiritual fire that rises from the tomb of the Prophet, on whom be peace, and is perceptible in darkness to those who have given their lives to its guardianship. The sacred relics share in that light. I can trace the slipper by it. I have always been able to trace it—through every room it has occupied, through every hand it has passed through, through this city. I know where it is tonight."

He paused. The smoke from the censer rose steadily.

"It is near," he said. "I could reach it. But it is not yet the moment."

"You know about the negotiations," I said.

His expression did not confirm or deny. It had the quality of a man who has made it his practice to know about everything that touches on what he guards. "I know that the man who took the slipper from the museum has entered into arrangements that will result in its return. I know the institution and the room. I know that you hold the key." The eagle eyes came to rest on me with a directness I had spent most of the autumn finding difficult to hold. "When the slipper is again in the case, you will give me

the key. This will be the price of your safety, and of the safety of those around you."

"You are asking me," I said, "to give a museum exhibit to someone who has no legal claim on it."

"I am asking you," he said, with a gentleness that was considerably more unsettling than anger would have been, "to return a stolen object to those from whom it was stolen. The framing is entirely a matter of which side of the glass you are standing on."

He held my gaze for a moment longer. Then he raised both hands in a brief, precise gesture—a salutation directed at something beyond the yellow walls, in a direction I thought I could identify—and turned, and drew aside the curtain, and was gone.

I sat for a moment. Then I got up and went to the curtain and pulled it aside.

Behind it was a door with a small barred opening at eye level. Through the opening came a dim green light whose source was not visible from where I stood. I leaned towards the opening, some instinct urging me to know what lay beyond it, and from the green void on the other side a cloud of vapour came through the bars and met my face—concentrated, direct, the same thing I had been breathing at ambient levels since I came to awareness in this room, now delivered at a density that made the ambient version feel like fresh air.

I fell back. The yellow ceiling came towards me. The green and the gold. The smoke in a thread still rising. The reek that

was in everything now filling everything, and below me no floor, or at any rate no floor I was any longer in contact with.

Then a floor. My floor. The corner of my writing table above and to the right, and my phone on the desk, and through the window the earliest sounds of a London morning beginning, and above me my own ceiling, which was white and which did not move.

I lay on my back looking up at it for a long time.

Then I sat up.

"Did I dream it?" I said, to the empty room. "Did I dream all of it?"

My shoes were on. I had been sitting at my desk in my shoes, which is not generally how I work. I looked at them. On the soles, and on the uppers at the toe, was dried mud of a kind not produced by any floor I had been on recently.

I sat in my study in the early January light and looked at my shoes for rather a long time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE BLACK TUBE

Renshaw arrived at nine. He looked at my shoes for a moment without speaking and then took two evidence bags from his case and began to photograph the soles. He had brought the bags with him. He had anticipated the shoes.

"The mud," he said, still looking at them. "Specific composition—clay-heavy, organic content. We can try to match it geographically. It'll take a few days but it gives us something."

"You believe it happened," I said.

"The building's entry log shows the door was opened twice between twelve-twenty and four in the morning," he said. "You were not conscious at the first opening. Someone used a duplicate code or bypassed the system. The second opening was you returning." He sealed each shoe carefully. "I believe you were transported to a location constructed to disorient, had a conversation with Yusuf of Aleppo, and were returned. I believe the demand was real and that he intends to act on it."

"He wants the key. He's wanted it since the beginning."

"Yes. And he is right that the slipper will return to the case. Calloway needs the immunity arrangement to survive—the slipper is his only leverage—and the negotiation is close." Renshaw looked at me steadily. "The question is what we do about Yusuf's demand when that happens. Which is not a question I intend to answer by giving him the key."

He left at half past ten, having arranged a patrol and given me a direct number. I stood at the window and watched him cross the courtyard and go through the arch.

At twenty-two minutes past eleven my doorbell rang.

I was not expecting anyone. I went to the intercom.

"*Effendim*," said the voice. "Open the door, if you please."

I pressed the entry release before I had fully decided to. Some quality of the voice: the patient certainty of it. I went to the flat door and opened it.

Yusuf of Aleppo came up the stairs without hurrying. He was in European clothes—a dark coat of good quality, the green sharif's turban above the collar—and he carried in his right hand what appeared at first to be a walking stick, until he reached the landing and I could see it properly. A hollow tube: black, lacquered, forty centimetres long, with a shaped mouthpiece at one end that I recognised immediately from its function rather than from having seen it before. I had experienced what it could do twice in the past twenty-four hours. I had no desire for a third experience.

He gestured with his free hand that I should step back into the flat.

I stepped back into the flat.

"You have come to the wrong conclusion," I said, "if you think I will keep this from the police."

"I have come," he said, entering and closing the door behind him, "to finalise a matter before the next development occurs. I have no wish to be here longer than necessary." He directed me,

with a slight movement of the tube, towards the study. "*Effendim*. Sit down."

I sat. He took the chair across the desk with the ease of a man revisiting a familiar arrangement, and he rested the tube across his knees in the manner of someone who wants you to be continuously aware of it without making a performance of the awareness.

"The negotiations," he said. "They are close to conclusion."

"I'm not in a position to discuss them with you."

"The fee has been agreed in principle," he said. "There is a meeting on Friday. The slipper will be returned to the case within the week." His eyes, which had been surveying the room, came to rest on me with the quality they always had: the look of a man who has spent a very long time being certain of things other people find uncertain. "When that happens, the key comes to me. You have heard this from me three times now, including once in a room I constructed specifically for the purpose. This is the last time."

He raised the tube and pointed it at my face. At that distance, having been on the receiving end of its contents twice in the past twelve hours, there was nothing hypothetical about the gesture.

"I've heard you clearly on all three occasions," I said. "My answer is the same as it was the first time you sat in this room. I cannot enter into arrangements with those who use murder as their method. Whatever the justice of the cause."

Something moved in his expression. Not anger. Something I could only identify as genuine, long-standing incomprehension at a position he had been encountering for months and had never been able to understand from the inside.

"The key," he said. "That is all."

The doorbell rang.

Yusuf's head turned towards the sound—the brief, involuntary movement of a man whose attention has been divided—and I came out of the chair and reached across the desk and grabbed for the tube.

He was faster than any man of his apparent age should have been. He rose in a single movement, caught my wrist in a grip of surprising force, turned it until the tube was no longer in my reach and my wrist was pointed in a direction it did not prefer, and my choice was between releasing the attempt and a dislocated joint. I released the attempt.

He stepped back. His breathing had not changed. He looked at me on the floor beside the desk with an expression that was not contemptuous, which was somehow worse than contempt.

"*Effendim*," he said quietly. "Do not do that again."

He looked at his phone. Something in what he saw changed his calculation: I could see it in the small, precise adjustment of his expression. Whatever he had been planning to say next, he had decided not to say it.

He walked into the hall. The front door opened and shut.

I got up. From the landing came a woman's voice—a brief, surprised exhalation, the sound of someone stepping into an

unexpected situation—and then footsteps on the stairs going down quickly.

I reached the window in time to see Sarelle come out through the building entrance and turn towards Fleet Street, and to see the tall figure of Yusuf of Aleppo, green turban visible above the heads of the courtyard, already at the archway without appearing to have hurried to get there.

A patrol car came around the far end of the court at that moment. Renshaw himself, who I had not known was still in the area, came through the arch from the Fleet Street side at a run.

"Renshaw!" I shouted from the window. "The archway—green turban—it's Yusuf of Aleppo!"

People in the courtyard turned. The patrol car accelerated towards the arch. Renshaw ran.

Yusuf of Aleppo was gone.

I stood at the window for a moment, looking at the empty arch and at Renshaw standing under it looking into Fleet Street with his hands on his hips, and at Sarelle, who had stopped walking and was looking back at me from the far side of the courtyard with an expression I could not read from this distance but which I thought contained, beneath its composure, something that was either regret or relief.

Then she, too, was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE LIGHT OF EL-MEDINEH

The preliminary analysis on the mud from my shoes came back the following morning: clay-heavy, with an organic content consistent with a south London location—a basement or cellar, possibly disused, somewhere south of the river. Renshaw had already narrowed the search area based on what he knew of Yusuf's movements over the preceding months. It was a start, he said, without particular optimism. The yellow room was not going to be found by the mud on a journalist's shoes.

We walked to the museum together in the cold morning light. Calloway's latest communication had arrived through Thurlow's office the day before: a single page, typed, emailed from an address that had bounced through four servers before arriving in Thurlow's inbox, and which led, when Renshaw's technical team traced it, to a café in Bermondsey that had seventeen regular customers with free wifi access and no CCTV facing the tables. The terms were restated: immunity for himself and his associate, safe passage, and a fee.

"He reduced the figure," Renshaw said.

"Significantly?"

"Meaningfully." He said it in the tone of a man who considers this a piece of intelligence about Calloway's situation. "He is still alive, he is still negotiating, and he has revised the price downward. Draw your own conclusions."

Mine were that Calloway was more uncomfortable than he had been a week ago. The Hashishin were still in the city—the operative in the Cardew's Buildings courtyard confirmed that—and the longer he stayed, the narrower his options became. He needed the deal done.

Charlton met us in the entrance hall and led us through to his office to review the letter. He had the quiet manner of a man who has decided that the best response to a prolonged and bizarre situation is to treat each development with the same measured attention as the last. He made coffee. We discussed the letter.

"The CPS won't move quickly on immunity," Renshaw said. "It requires a level of sign-off that takes time even when everyone is disposed to agree. Which they may not be. Calloway has a long file."

"The museum's position," Charlton said carefully, "is that the slipper's return is the primary objective. The fee is secondary. The immunity arrangement is between Mr. Calloway and the Crown, and not our concern." He paused. "I would like my exhibition back."

We went through to the Layard Room.

The empty case continued to draw an unusual number of visitors for a case containing nothing. There is something about the absent object that focuses the imagination more precisely than the present one, and the case with its brass rail and its broken-repaired glass had accumulated a small gravitational field of its own. Three clusters of visitors were distributed around it

at the required distance, reading the explanatory panel with varying degrees of attention.

I had been standing near the east windows for perhaps five minutes, half-listening to Renshaw's quiet exchange with Charlton about visitor log patterns, when I became aware of the figure near the far end of the room.

It was an old man: bent slightly at the shoulder, gray-haired under a soft felt hat, wearing a long coat of the enveloping kind—an Inverness cape, I thought, which was eccentric but not extraordinary for a certain type of academic visitor. He was looking at the case with the sustained attention of someone who had come specifically to see it and intended to make the visit worthwhile.

What I noticed first was the way the room moved around him. Not dramatically—nothing so obvious as people stepping back. But in the natural, unconscious distribution of a crowd in a gallery, there was a slightly larger circle of clear floor around this particular figure than his age and presence would warrant. People who had not looked at him were nonetheless not close to him.

Then I noticed the right side of his body.

He was holding something. Not visibly—the coat covered both arms completely—but there was a quality of tension in the right side of the coat, a slight asymmetry in how it fell, that was different from the natural hang of fabric over an arm at rest. I had seen this asymmetry before. I had registered it in the Layard Room weeks ago and had noted it without fully understanding what I was noting.

Yusuf had told me that the relics of the Prophet share in a light perceptible to those who have devoted their lives to guarding them. I had thought about this several times since the yellow room. I thought about it now, standing near the east windows of the Layard Room, because there was something about the quality of attention the old man was paying to the empty case that I could not name precisely but could not ignore.

I touched Renshaw's arm.

He had already moved.

He crossed the room at a pace that made people turn, and before the old man had registered the approach Renshaw had his hand on the coat's collar. The old man moved—moved wrong for an old man, with a speed and a bodily competence that the stoop and the hat had been working to conceal—and for three or four seconds they were a confused unit near the far end of the case, and then Calloway was clear and running, and Renshaw was swearing with impressive precision, and the room had come alive with the particular energy of a public space in which something unexpected is occurring.

I was moving. Everyone in the Layard Room was either moving or frozen. Calloway reached the communicating door to the Assyrian Gallery and went through it at a run, and on the floor of the Layard Room, near the base of the case, something had fallen from the Inverness coat.

I stopped. Renshaw, returning from the door at speed, stopped beside me.

A fragment of ancient moroccan leather, the original red faded almost to brown, lay on the polished parquet floor of the Layard Room. About the size of a child's shoe. Roughly the shape of one.

No one in the room moved towards it.

"Don't touch it," Renshaw said. He said it clearly, to the room, and the room heard him, and no one moved towards it.

Charlton arrived at the door, having heard the noise from his office. He took in the situation in one sweep of his practised eye, went to the evidence storage cabinet in the corner—which he had fitted for exactly this kind of contingency—and returned with the forensic toolkit that had replaced the slipper in the case since December.

He worked without speaking, and within two minutes the slipper was back in the case and the case was closed.

On the floor near the Assyrian Gallery door lay the scattered elements of a disguise: a gray wig, a false beard and moustache, both good quality, and the Inverness cape itself, dropped at the threshold. The CCTV footage, when Renshaw reviewed it, showed the old man entering the museum forty minutes earlier, moving through the building with the unhurried patience of someone who had decided exactly how long this was going to take, and then departing through the Assyrian Room at a speed that confirmed he had never been old.

The face was not captured at any angle.

"He returned it," I said, when Renshaw came back from the corridor.

"He returned it," Renshaw said. "Without a completed immunity agreement, without a finalised fee, without anything in writing. He walked it into the museum in his coat and left it on the floor."

"Then he still needs the deal."

"Yes," Renshaw said. "But now the slipper is back, the case is the case, and the key in your possession is the relevant object again." He looked at me. "Which means Yusuf's demand, which we have so far been able to treat as prospective, is now immediate."

I looked at the case. The slipper sat in it as it had sat in it since the beginning of this affair, in the manner of an object that has no idea what it has cost.

The key was at my bank. It had been there throughout. I had not touched it since Thurlow gave it to me.

I had not given it to anyone.

I was not going to.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE THREE MESSAGES

I had moved out of the flat two days after the black tube incident. Renshaw had arranged the hotel—a quiet place near the Strand, the kind used by academics and minor civil servants, where the carpets were good and the staff asked no questions—and the arrangement had the practical advantage that a building with a staffed reception desk and keyed lift access was harder to drug and transport from than a Georgian terrace with a letter box.

My flat was not unoccupied in my absence. Renshaw had arranged for it to appear lived-in—a lamp on a timer, the occasional visible shadow at the window—while he pursued the yellow room's location through the mud analysis and a widening canvas of south London properties that matched the soil composition. He had not found it yet. He was, he said, close.

The slipper sat in its case in the Layard Room. The negotiations with Calloway continued through Thurlow's office, with the Crown Prosecution Service now formally involved in the immunity question. Progress was being made, Renshaw said. These things took time.

The three messages arrived on a Thursday afternoon in late January.

The first was a note, pushed under my hotel room door at some point between two and four in the afternoon while I was in the lobby making a call. I found it when I came back: a small envelope, white this time rather than amethyst, addressed in

handwriting I recognised immediately from the first message I had received in this affair. The same careful, square hand. The same deliberate brevity.

It read: The key to the museum case. Place it with the night porter of this hotel before nine o'clock this evening, in a sealed envelope addressed to A. Yusuf. It will be collected. This is the last request before a different approach becomes necessary. A Friend.

I sat with this for a moment. The handwriting confirmed the source. The tone—*last request before a different approach*—confirmed the urgency. I was being told, as I had been told three times before, that the key was the price of continued safety, and that the patience behind the demand was not unlimited.

I set it aside and opened my laptop.

The second message had arrived as a WhatsApp notification while I was downstairs: from Renshaw's number, the same one I had been using since October.

Plot moving on keys. Need you to draw them from bank and come to hotel bar at eight tonight—I have something arranged. Don't ring, in a meeting until seven. B.

I read this twice. Renshaw's messages tended towards the direct and the functional and this was consistent with his style. The instruction to not ring was unusual but not inexplicable. I put my phone down.

The third message was waiting at the reception desk when I went down to ask about dinner arrangements. The duty manager

produced a slip of paper with the careful handwriting of someone who has taken a phone message and knows its contents may matter.

Inspector Renshaw rang at 3:45 pm. Message: Please tell Mr. Brennan to take what I'm expecting to his flat—not the hotel—and I'll join him there in twenty minutes. Urgent.

I looked at the slip. I looked at the duty manager, who confirmed: a man's voice, businesslike, gave the name Renshaw, left no callback number.

I went back to my room and sat down with all three messages in front of me.

Message one was from Yusuf. That was not in question.

Messages two and three both claimed to be from Renshaw. They gave contradictory instructions: two said to bring the keys to the hotel bar; three said to bring them to my flat. Both claimed urgency. Neither left a callback number beyond the one I already had.

I called Renshaw's number. Voicemail.

I called the Yard's direct number for his team. Renshaw was in the field and not currently reachable; could they take a message? I left one.

I sent Renshaw a text: *Three messages this afternoon. Call when you can.*

I waited twenty minutes. My phone showed the text as delivered but not read.

I thought about what I knew. At least one of messages two and three was not from Renshaw—they contradicted each other. If one was a fabrication, either could be. If both were

fabrications, then someone had spoofed his number or used a very similar one for the WhatsApp, and had made a phone call to the hotel impersonating him. The purpose in both cases was the same: to get me to go to the bank and withdraw the keys, and then to be somewhere specific and predictable with them.

I was not going to the bank.

What I was going to do, I sat and worked out over the following ten minutes. The key was at the bank and would stay there. But the flat was not currently occupied, and if someone was planning to meet me there—whether that was Renshaw with a genuine trap or Yusuf's people with a different kind—the most useful thing I could do was go and see which.

I texted Renshaw: *Going to the flat. Will explain when I reach you.*

I put on my coat and went down to the lobby. The duty manager raised a hand as I passed and I nodded and continued through the Strand entrance into the cold evening. The January streets were busy enough for cover and empty enough to make a tail detectable, and I walked in the way that three months of this had taught me: varying my pace, crossing when it wasn't necessary, using the reflections in the dark windows of closed shops.

I did not see anyone. This proved nothing.

The courtyard off Fleet Street was quiet. The lamp at the far end was on. My flat windows were dark, which was consistent with the lamp timer not having triggered yet, or with someone having disabled it, and I stood for a moment at the courtyard

entrance looking up at them and thinking about what I had found the last time I came back to this building expecting something to be there.

Then I put my key in the door and went up the stairs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I KEEP THE APPOINTMENT

The study lamp was on. The timer had not triggered—someone had turned it on.

Yusuf of Aleppo sat in the chair across the desk. He was in European clothes, the green turban above the collar of a dark coat. The black tube lay across his knees. He looked at me as I stopped in the doorway with the expression of a man who has been waiting for a sufficient length of time to have moved past impatience into something more settled.

"Effendim," he said. "Close the door."

I closed it.

"Sit down."

I sat.

We looked at each other for a moment across the desk that I had been working at since October, in the study where all of this had begun, and I thought about how many times the same two people had been in the same two chairs in this room over the course of the preceding months, and about how little had changed in the fundamental structure of the encounter each time.

"The keys," he said. "Where are they?"

"At the bank," I said. "I didn't bring them."

He studied me. The black tube was still across his knees, and his right hand rested on it with the negligent authority of someone who has made peace with the effort required. He was looking at my face, and at my coat, and at the absence of

anything that would indicate I had been to a bank today and come back with something significant.

"You chose not to bring them," he said.

"Yes."

"Despite the messages."

"Because of them," I said. "At least one of the messages purporting to be from Renshaw was not from Renshaw. If someone wanted me to produce the keys and be in a specific place, the appropriate response was to be in the specific place without the keys and see what was there."

A pause. Something moved in his expression—not anger, not the incomprehension I had seen there before when he confronted my refusals. Something more considered.

"You have grown careful," he said.

"I have had reasons to."

He raised the tube. He pointed it at my face, at the distance we both knew was sufficient. I did not move. I had been through what it delivered twice and had survived it twice and I had arrived at this room having decided, on the walk through the January streets, that I was not going to allow the prospect of it to change my answer. Whatever it cost.

I sat still and looked at him and waited.

A silence of perhaps thirty seconds.

He lowered the tube.

I watched him do it. He set it on the desk between us with a precision that had the quality of a deliberate gesture—not putting it away, but placing it in a neutral territory. He looked

at me across it with the sharp, ageless eyes that I had spent months being afraid of, and that I was still afraid of, and that I was not going to let change my answer.

"It no longer matters," he said, "in the way it did."

I waited.

"I have asked for the key three times," he said. "As the correct form of a correct resolution. A sacred object returns to its guardians through the proper intermediary, by the lawful mechanism—the key that was given to you passes through your hand to mine, and the chain of custody is restored. This was what I required." He looked at the tube and then at me. "You have refused the form three times. The refusal is consistent and I accept it as such." He paused. "The form is not possible. The return remains necessary."

"What does that mean?" I said.

"It means," he said, "that the slipper will leave the museum before morning. Not through the case key. By other means. My people have been in this city for four months. They have been patient because patience was required. It is no longer required."

I looked at him. The tube on the desk between us. The lamp on the timer. The January dark outside the window.

"You don't need the key," I said. "You never needed it."

"No," he said. "I do not need it. The case can be broken. It has been broken before. I asked for the key because the key was the right way. Because a thing taken by force, even in pursuit of a just return, is diminished by the force. I wanted it done correctly." He looked at me with the patience that had somehow

survived everything it had cost him. "You have not permitted that. I regret it."

Below, in the courtyard, the patrol intercom buzzed—the routine call-in that Renshaw had arranged, checking the building was secure.

Yusuf rose. He picked up the tube with the unhurried movement of a man completing the final item of his business for the day.

"You have been honest with me throughout," he said, from the doorway. "More honest than most. And you have not touched the slipper." He paused with one hand on the door frame. "These things are noted. They do not change what must happen tonight. But they are noted."

He went.

I heard no footsteps on the stairs. I did not go to the window. I sat at my desk in the flat I had come back to with nothing in my hands, and I sat there for a long time.

Then I called Renshaw.

"He was here," I said, when he answered. "He says they're taking the slipper tonight. By breaking the case."

A short silence. "How long ago did he leave?"

"Four or five minutes."

"Right." The sound of movement, of a car door, of an engine. "Get to the museum. Now."

I put on my coat and went back down the stairs and into the cold street, and turned towards the museum at a pace that was almost running, which was probably already too late but was the

only response that made any sense, and I thought about what Yusuf had said—*they are noted*—and about what it meant to receive that from a man whose methods I had refused and whose cause I had never quite been able to dismiss, and I ran.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE WATCHER IN BANK CHAMBERS

Before I describe what we found at the museum, I need to set out what Renshaw had been doing that same afternoon. I learned all of it the following morning, in his account, which he gave me over bad coffee in a conference room at Scotland Yard with the particular flatness of a man recounting an episode that reflects poorly on his own judgement.

I interpolate it here because without it the museum events make less sense, and because the two things were happening simultaneously while Yusuf was in my flat telling me that the slipper would be taken before morning. The Fates, as Renshaw observed in his characteristically dry way, had arranged themselves that evening into a shape that was very nearly comic.

He had been on Fleet Street at around four o'clock, on his way back to the Yard from an interview, when something in the face of the building directly above the branch of the London County bank at the Fleet Street corner caught his attention. Not the building itself—a fairly undistinguished block of commercial offices, Bank Chambers as the sign on the door identified it. What caught his attention was a tiny, irregular IR pulse from a point above the bank's frosted ground-floor window.

Renshaw had spent enough time working technology-assisted surveillance to know what that pulse might mean. He went in.

On the first floor of Bank Chambers, beyond a board listing three firms of solicitors and one press agency, a card had been

newly pinned to a door frame: THE MERIDIAN FUTURES COMPANY. Nothing on the door itself. Inside, an outer office with one desk and a teenage office assistant who had the expression of a person who had been given no work to do for three weeks and was beginning to resent it.

Renshaw produced a card. The assistant took it to the inner door, raised a small shutter set into the door's lower panel, and passed it through to someone unseen.

He was still watching when the shutter was raised again and his card came back out. The door opened.

Earl Calloway was inside.

He was leaner than Renshaw remembered, and the right side of his coat fell differently from the left. He was standing in a darkened room with the only illumination coming from a laptop screen on a white-covered table, and he was holding a compact pistol in his left hand with the ease of a man for whom that adaptation had become habitual. He looked at Renshaw with the expression of a man who has been expecting a variety of visitors and has simply noted which variety has arrived.

"Inspector," he said. "You've called at an inconvenient time."

Renshaw assessed the room. A small device attached to the ceiling: a wireless camera, its lens positioned to look downward through a pinhole in the floor, which he recognised as accessing the frosted upper section of the bank window directly below. The laptop screen showed—in crisp, live resolution—the interior of

the bank manager's office one floor down. A desk, a partition wall, a corridor leading to the branch's back offices.

"Sit down," Calloway said pleasantly. "You can see I'm occupied."

Renshaw sat. There was, as he acknowledged to me the following morning, nothing else reasonable to do.

"That's Sarelle's work," Calloway said, nodding at the camera housing. "She installed it during a visit to open an account. We've been watching the manager's schedule for three weeks. The combination of the strong-room is entered on a physical keypad—you can see it from this angle if you know what to look at." He glanced at the screen. "I also have a duplicate card for the lobby door. Sarelle obtained the impression when she deposited a box of valueless jewellery last month."

"Why are you telling me this?" Renshaw said.

"Because you're going to be here for a while and I'd rather you understand what you're watching." Calloway looked at the screen. "The slipper was returned to the case by that extraordinary operation on the roof, which I understand was mine. It was taken from the case last night by people considerably more determined than I am. I would like it back. The museum case key is currently in the bank's strong-room. With that key, I can re-enter the negotiation from a position of having something to negotiate with." He glanced at Renshaw. "You know this is the most rational approach available to anyone in this situation."

"I know," Renshaw said, "that you are explaining a crime to me while pointing a gun at me, which is not a strong opening."

"I'm explaining a situation," Calloway said. "The crime part happens in about twenty minutes."

Sarelle arrived at twenty past six. She took in the situation—Calloway standing, Renshaw seated, the screen showing the now-dark bank office, the office boy having been sent home at five—and set down her bag with the composed efficiency that Renshaw had by now come to expect from her. She found rope in the bag and tied Renshaw's wrists to the chair with the same neat competence that I had experienced in the Waterloo flat.

"I'm sorry," she said, meaning it, which Renshaw later confirmed made it simultaneously better and worse.

"We've been through this," Renshaw said. "You and Brennan and I are going to have to stop meeting like this."

Calloway, already in a long coat that covered the bandaged arm, checked the screen one final time. The bank's resident messenger had completed his evening round; the premises showed on the camera as empty.

"Watch the screen," he said to Renshaw. "You'll find it instructive."

Renshaw watched.

What the camera showed, over the next forty minutes, was the methodical professional operation of a man who had spent weeks preparing for exactly this. The lobby door opened. The corridor was traversed. The strong-room staircase descended. The keypad was approached. And then: the strong-room opened, and Calloway's left hand appeared briefly in frame at the safe's door.

And then Calloway came back up the stairs and out of the bank and into the night, and Sarelle, watching the screen beside Renshaw, said nothing for a long moment.

"Well?" said Renshaw.

"The safe," she said. "It was already empty."

She cut Renshaw's wrists free at nine o'clock, with the same apology she always offered and which Renshaw, to his credit, always accepted as genuine. She left a phone on the table for him to use when he was ready.

He called me from the Bank Chambers office at nine-seventeen. I did not answer because I was already at the museum.

What Renshaw heard in my voicemail message, an hour later, told him what Calloway had already concluded in the strong-room: that the safe was empty because I had never returned the keys to it, and the keys were irrelevant now in any case, because the museum case had been broken by the time Brennan reached the Layard Room at eight-forty-five.

The case was open. The rail was intact, the windows were intact, the bars were intact. Charlton was in the room already, very pale, standing at a distance from the case with his hands at his sides.

The slipper of the Prophet was gone.

Renshaw arrived twelve minutes after I did, and we stood together in the Layard Room in the museum's closed-for-the-night silence, and looked at the empty case, and did not speak for a while.

"Yusuf took it tonight," I said at last.

"Yes," Renshaw said.

"While I was at my flat with him."

"The visit to your flat was the distraction," he said. "The slipper was never the secondary objective."

He was right, of course. The slipper had always been the only objective. Everything else—the key demand, the yellow room, the flat visits, the tube, the negotiations, the four months of London—had been in service of one thing. And when the moment came, Yusuf had simply arranged to occupy the relevant people while his operatives did the work.

I thought about what he had said as he left: *they are noted*. And about *the form is not possible*. *The return remains necessary*. He had known, by the time he sat in my study that evening, that the form was already irrelevant. He had been saying goodbye.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SARELLE

I was at the hotel the following morning, trying to write and failing, when she appeared at the door of the residents' lounge.

She looked as if she had slept very little in the past forty-eight hours. Not distressed—she was not a person who performed distress—but worn in a way that the composure could not entirely conceal. She had on the same practical coat she had been wearing in the service lane the night I followed her with the shopping, and she was carrying nothing.

"He's gone," she said, before she had sat down.

I indicated the chair across from me.

She sat. She looked at her hands for a moment—a gesture I had not seen from her before, and which told me more about the preceding forty-eight hours than anything she had yet said.

"Two days ago," she said. "He told me where he was going. I told him not to go. He went."

"To Yusuf's hideout," I said.

She looked at me. "You know about it."

"Renshaw has been working the mud analysis from my shoes. He thinks he has the area. South London, a basement."

"It's not a basement," she said. "Not in London. He moved the operation after the yellow room. We tracked him—Earl tracked him, over two weeks, using the surveillance setup in the Bank Chambers office." She paused. "Yusuf is in Kent. A rented

property near Watling Street. Isolated. He's been there for the last three weeks."

"And Calloway went there."

"He found the address on Friday. He had been building towards it for days—the same way he built towards the museum, gradually, systematically. He told me on Friday evening where it was and what he intended to do." She looked at me steadily. "He intended to go to the property, find the slipper, and take it. The last time, he said. He would return it to the museum himself, without conditions, without the fee—just put it back and get clear."

"Why?"

She was quiet for a moment. "Because the negotiation had gone on long enough and he was tired. He had lost his hand and nearly died three times and he wanted it to end. He said the slipper was cursed and he was inclined to agree with everyone who had said so, and that returning it himself, with nothing asked for, was the only version of this story that ended cleanly."

I thought about this. It was consistent with everything I knew of the man.

"He hasn't come back," I said.

"No."

"And you haven't heard from him."

"Not since Friday evening."

Two days. I looked at her face and at what was trying very hard not to show in it.

"You need me to help you find him," I said.

"I need someone to go to that property with me," she said. "I can't go alone. I know what's in it—I know what Yusuf uses it for, what he keeps there. A lone woman approaching that building at night would be found and stopped before she reached the door. With you—with someone who has a documented relationship to this affair, who Yusuf has met, who he has his own reasons to engage with—it's different." She held my gaze. "I know what I am asking. I know what you would be walking into. I am asking it anyway because I have no one else to ask and because you are the only person involved in this who has treated both of us as something other than criminals."

I was aware, sitting across from her in the hotel lounge with the January light coming through the windows and the ordinary business of the hotel moving around us, that this was the conversation I had been circling for months. She had been the mystery at the edge of everything since the first note through the letter box. Now she was sitting across a table asking me for help with her hands flat on the surface in front of her and nothing concealed in her face.

"I want you to explain something first," I said. "The night of the note. Chapter Two, you might call it. Why me?"

She was quiet for a moment. "Earl had been following Marchmont since Port Said—you know that. He knew what Marchmont had taken and he knew what Yusuf intended to do about it. The night you received the note, we had received intelligence that the operation was moving that evening—that Yusuf's people were going to the Dulwich house. Earl knew a journalist named Brennan

had met Marchmont on the ship and had been asking questions. He thought a warning through you might reach Marchmont faster than any other route."

"And you came yourself. Not Earl."

"Earl was in a difficult situation physically at that point. And I am better at this kind of thing than he is." The ghost of something crossed her face—not a smile, but the shape of one. "He is better at the parts that require extraordinary nerve. I am better at the parts that require the appearance of ordinary circumstances."

"The disguises," I said. "The basket. The surveillance camera in the bank ceiling."

"Yes."

"And the medical care."

She looked at the window. "Yes. That too."

The silence that followed was not uncomfortable. Outside, the Strand moved past with its morning indifference.

"I need Renshaw involved," I said at last. "I won't go to Kent without him knowing. Not because I don't trust you—I think, at this point, that I do—but because if something happens to either of us in that building, someone needs to know where we are. And because this ends with Yusuf facing consequences for what he's done, and that requires the police."

She considered this. "He'll try to arrest Earl."

"Renshaw is a practical man," I said. "He wants Yusuf. He also knows that Calloway has information that helps him get Yusuf. If Calloway is alive and prepared to cooperate with the

investigation, Renshaw can be reasoned with." I looked at her.

"Can Calloway be persuaded to cooperate?"

Something moved in her face that was close to what I had seen on the staircase—the thing that appeared when someone named the exact thing being managed.

"If he is alive," she said quietly, "he will do whatever I tell him. He has promised me this affair is the last. I believe him."

"Then call Renshaw," I said. "Or I will. And tell me the address in Kent."

She told me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE GATE HOUSE

Renshaw drove. He had listened to what Sarelle told him with the focused attention he brings to information that is going to require immediate action, and had asked three questions, and had said very little else. His presence on the road to Kent was on the explicit understanding that he would remain with the car unless called—that Brennan and Sarelle would approach the property alone, because two people asking for directions were less conspicuous than two people and a police detective, and because Yusuf of Aleppo had met Renshaw twice and might make different decisions if he saw him coming.

We left London before noon. The January countryside showed itself grudgingly through a fine, persistent rain: bare hedgerows, waterlogged fields, the A2 giving way eventually to narrower roads where the verges had been cut back at some point and were growing back without hurry. Sarelle sat in the front and looked out the window and said little. She had not slept. She had the manner of someone who has run the calculation many times and has arrived at the same answer each time and is not going to stop running it.

The village of Wenbury was a cluster of buildings around a crossroads, with a pub called The Maypole where the bar was warm and the landlord was the kind of man who knows everything that moves through his part of the world and talks about it freely.

Sarelle went in alone. She came out after fifteen minutes with the information she needed: the Gate House, a small Tudor manor about a mile along the road, had been taken on a twelve-month lease six weeks ago by a private individual. He kept unusual hours. He had staff—two or three people who came and went—but was not often seen himself. He had declined, politely but definitively, every attempt by local residents to introduce themselves. The letting agent, when the landlord had had occasion to speak to them, had described the tenant as a distinguished elderly gentleman of overseas origin who required complete privacy.

"That's him," Sarelle said, getting back in the car.

"You're sure?" Renshaw said.

"The description," she said. "And Earl had a photograph."

We drove a short distance further along the road and parked on a farm track where the car was not visible from the lane. Renshaw set up his position: a clear line of sight to the Gate House entrance, his radio on, two officers he had briefed earlier parked at either end of the road in unmarked vehicles. He showed us his phone. "I'm on," he said. "You call me, I come. Don't decide not to call me."

Sarelle and I set off along the field margin towards the house.

The grounds were extensive and had been allowed to run somewhat wild, which was either the consequence of the original owner's neglect or the deliberate preference of the current occupant. Both seemed plausible. The approach from the north

brought us through dense overgrowth—bare winter hawthorn, bramble, a stand of old yews—that provided cover and made the going slow. The house emerged gradually: a small Tudor structure, compact in plan, with the quality of a building that has been in its landscape for several centuries and has decided to outlast everything around it. Its roof in the grey January light was the colour of wet rust.

We circled it at distance before approaching, as Sarelle had clearly done this kind of thing before and moved with the patience of someone who knows that twenty minutes of observation prevents an hour of consequences. I watched her and followed her lead.

A light in one of the ground-floor windows. No movement visible. One vehicle in the track beside the house: a dark saloon with mud on the lower panels.

"One person," Sarelle said, very quietly. "Possibly two. The others will have gone with the slipper."

We were in the cover of the thicket at the western edge of the garden when headlights appeared at the end of the lane. A car. It turned in through the gate and moved along the track at low speed.

Sarelle pulled me down into the undergrowth. We watched.

The car stopped beside the house. A figure got out: tall, unhurried, wearing a coat and scarf against the cold. He did not look towards the garden. He went to the front door, which opened from the inside, and went in.

Sarelle was very still beside me.

"Yusuf," I said. It was not a question.

"Yes," she said.

I looked at him through the branches as he went through the door: the bearing, the quality of unhurried authority. I thought about the yellow room and the flat and the Dulwich night and every encounter over the preceding months. He was here. He had the slipper. And somewhere in this house, or somewhere in its grounds, was the man Sarelle had spent the winter keeping alive.

We waited in the cold until the lights in the ground-floor window had been out for thirty minutes.

Then Sarelle took the small bag from her shoulder, found a pair of rubber-soled shoes and changed into them, and handed me a second pair she had brought. We crossed the garden on the most sheltered route she had already identified, avoiding the gravel path, keeping to the grass.

The French windows on the south-facing loggia were unlocked.

I registered this, and registered that Sarelle had registered it, and watched her absorb the information with the professional attention of someone who knows that an unlocked door is sometimes an invitation and sometimes a trap and is never simply carelessness.

We went in.

The house was dark and completely quiet. We moved through it by torchlight: an entrance hall, stripped back to bare boards; three ground-floor rooms, doors open, all empty of furniture; a short corridor leading to a staircase that descended.

Sarelle went first, making no sound on the wooden treads. I followed. The torch showed stone walls sweating with the cold, and at the bottom, a heavy oak door set into the stonework with iron hardware that belonged to a different century from the one outside.

The key was in the lock. On the door's right side, at approximately eye height, a small barred opening allowed a faint reddish glow to seep through from whatever was beyond.

Sarelle put her hand on the key. She turned it slowly, and the lock moved, and she looked at me once before she pushed the door.

The smell reached us first: ancient stone and damp and something else, something organic and cold and patient that I could not immediately identify but that produced, in me, an immediate and irrational wish to be somewhere else entirely.

Then she pushed the door fully open, and we went in, and I understood the smell.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE POOL OF DEATH

The dungeon was old—medieval old, the kind of old that has its own smell, distinct from mere damp: stone and centuries and something below both of them that resists categorisation. From the ceiling hung a lantern of rose-coloured waxed paper on a copper frame, its candle burning steadily in the enclosed air, casting a diffuse reddish glow over the room.

Most of the floor was water.

A rectangular pool filled the space from wall to wall, leaving a narrow stone ledge on either side perhaps thirty centimetres wide. The water was opaque—dark, reddish in the lamplight, with a surface that showed nothing of its depth. At the far end of the room, set into the stone wall at approximately chest height, a niche had been cut. In the niche, lit by the reddish glow from the lantern and from a small pane of red glass in the wall above it, sat an object about the size and shape of a child's shoe.

I heard Sarelle make a sound beside me. Not loud. The sound of someone absorbing information that has been feared and is now confirmed.

"The trap," she said. "This is it."

I was looking at the pool. At the ledges on either side. At the distance from the door to the niche. "He came here," I said.

"If he came into this room," she said, very carefully, "he found this." She looked at the water. "He is not here. There is

no sign of any struggle. No blood." She was still for a moment. "He was smarter than to come into this room." She said it with the flatness of someone who has been terrified and has just received evidence that the specific thing they feared has not occurred—and who is now moving immediately to what comes next.

A sound: a slow, persistent drip from somewhere above the pool, water falling into water.

"I can reach the niche from the ledge," she said. She was already looking at the route: the ledge on the left side, perhaps eight metres to the far wall, the niche at the end.

"Sarelle—"

"The ledge doesn't go all the way," she said, studying it. "I'll have to go through the water for the last two metres. It can't be deep near the wall." She had already set her bag down. "Wait here."

She stepped onto the left-hand ledge before I could position myself to stop her, moving with the careful balance of someone who has thought about the available options and chosen the least bad one. The ledge held her. She moved along it, back to the wall, placing each foot with precision.

I stood in the doorway and watched her and held the torch so she could see, and looked at the pool, which was very still.

She reached the point where the ledge ended—perhaps three metres from the niche—and paused. Then she stepped off into the water.

It came up to her knees. She steadied herself and moved forward, keeping her arms clear of the surface. One step. Another.

The water parted.

Not dramatically—not with any noise. Just a displacement, a slow opening of the surface two metres to her left, a rising that was different from the movement of water. Something very large was underneath, and it was moving towards her.

I was already moving. I crossed the ledge in three steps, grabbed both her wrists, and pulled—not carefully, not with any strategy, just with everything available to me—and she came up and forward and we both hit the stone floor beside the door in a heap as behind us, in the place where her legs had been, something enormous closed its jaws on water.

The crocodile was perhaps two metres long. It had the absolute patience of something that has been in darkness for a long time and is entirely adapted to it. It did not come onto the ledge. It churned the pool once, twice, and then was still.

I got to my feet and got the door shut. The old iron bolt—the kind made to stop something from getting out—slid home. I leaned against the door.

Sarelle was sitting on the stone floor of the passage, dripping, breathing with the controlled precision of someone managing their body through shock. After a moment she said: "The slipper."

"We can't reach it."

"I know."

I called Renshaw.

He arrived in fourteen minutes with two officers and, through a call he made on the road, a specialist unit from the county police whose remit included exotic animals held illegally—a unit whose existence I had not previously had occasion to appreciate. He came down the stairs and looked at us and looked at the closed door and said nothing for a moment.

"There is a crocodile in the dungeon," I said.

"Right," he said, with the flatness of a man for whom this information has entered a category that is beyond surprise.

The specialist unit worked for twenty minutes. They were professional and methodical and used a long pole and a lamp and the kind of equipment that suggested they had done this before, which I found both reassuring and disconcerting. The crocodile was secured at the far end of the pool. An officer in waders reached the niche with a forensic gripper.

The niche was empty.

Renshaw came back to the passage where I was standing with Sarelle—who had been given a foil blanket by one of his officers and was wearing it with the dignity of someone who refuses to be diminished by a foil blanket.

"The slipper isn't there," he said.

I had been thinking, during the preceding twenty minutes, about the geometry of the room. About the niche and the pool and the ledges and the door. About the fact that the dungeon had been designed as a trap—the unlocked house, the key in the door, the slipper placed where anyone who found it would have to cross the

pool to reach it. And about the fact that someone had been in this house before us.

"There's another way in," I said.

Renshaw looked at me.

"The niche," I said. "It's at chest height in the wall. The wall is exterior stone. If there's an access from the outside—a drainage channel, a servery passage, anything dating from the original construction—someone who knew about it could reach the niche without going through the dungeon at all."

The officer who had waded out confirmed it fifteen minutes later: a low tunnel in the base of the exterior wall, sealed with a modern magnetic lock that had been opened recently. Calloway had found it. He had done the research, mapped the building, identified the trap, and found the way around it. He had come in through the wall while Sarelle and I were inside dealing with what the trap had to offer.

He had been here the whole time.

"He's gone," Renshaw said. He was not expressing surprise.

"He has the slipper and he's gone."

Sarelle, still in the foil blanket, spoke for the first time since Renshaw had arrived. "He'll contact us," she said. "He said he would return it. He still intends to." She looked at me directly, with an expression that was not hope—it was more specific than hope. "He promised me."

We stood in the passage of the Gate House in the January dark, with a crocodile in the room behind us and the Kent countryside silent outside, and I thought about a man with one

hand who had mapped an old dungeon and found the door in the wall, and who had taken the slipper again, for the last time, from under everyone's noses.

Whatever came next, I was increasingly certain, was going to be his choice, not ours.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

HOW WE WERE REINFORCED

Three days after the Gate House, London went quiet. The particular quality of quiet that had attached itself, over the preceding months, to the absence of the Hashishin—the kind of quiet that has an edge to it, because you are not certain whether it means the storm has passed or is about to arrive.

The museum case stood empty again. Charlton had replaced the explanatory panel with a new one that said, with considerable diplomatic restraint, that the item was temporarily unavailable for display pending conservation review. The visitors who came to see the empty case had thinned somewhat, which Renshaw observed was probably for the best.

The Gate House had been vacated. The Hashishin operatives who had been watching the museum and Brennan's flat and the surrounding streets had, apparently, gone. Apparently.

On the evening of the third day I received a text from an unknown number. It read: *Ten o'clock tonight. Your flat. One condition: Renshaw. The Khedive Star sends its regards.*

I called Renshaw and read it to him.

"He's alive," Renshaw said, in the tone of a man for whom this resolves one question and opens several others.

"He's alive and he has the slipper and he wants a meeting with a police officer present. Which means he's ready to finalise the deal."

Renshaw was at my flat by nine. I had returned to it from the hotel the day before, on the reasoning that the hotel was not significantly safer and was considerably less comfortable. Renshaw had accepted this reasoning with the expression he uses when he accepts things he disagrees with.

The bell rang at two minutes to ten. I pressed the entry release without using the intercom, which was either a sign of how far the autumn had changed my relationship with caution or a sign of how far I had come to trust what I knew of the people on the other side of the door.

Sarelle came in first. She was wearing the same practical coat and she looked like someone who had slept properly for the first time in several weeks, which had the paradoxical effect of making the exhaustion more visible rather than less. Behind her came Earl Calloway.

He was thinner than he had been in the Waterloo flat. The Stetson was on. His right sleeve was tucked. He moved into the study with the assessing attention of someone who has arrived at a location for a specific purpose and is confirming it is suitable, and he looked at Renshaw with the expression of a man who has been aware of his counterpart's file for years and is now putting a face to it.

"Inspector," he said.

"Mr. Calloway," Renshaw said.

They shook hands—one hand between them—with the mutual respect of people who have been in complex opposition to each

other for some months and have decided that the opposition is over.

"Sit down," I said. "Both of you."

They sat. Sarelle stood near the bookcase. Renshaw remained standing. I sat at the desk.

Calloway stated his terms with the directness that I had come to recognise as his primary mode. He had the slipper. He would return it—to Brennan, for deposit that night in the museum case—as the first act of the resolution, not the last. In exchange: the immunity arrangement currently being processed by the CPS would be finalised, the outstanding warrant would be held pending that finalisation, and he and Sarelle would have safe passage out of the country within forty-eight hours.

"The CPS timeline is not within my control," Renshaw said.

"I know. I'm asking you to push it." Calloway looked at him steadily. "I'm also prepared to make a full statement regarding the Hashishin's operations in this country—every safe house I identified, every operative I observed, everything the surveillance setup gave me over the preceding weeks. That is material that Scotland Yard cannot get any other way. It is worth considerably more than an immunity agreement."

Renshaw looked at me. I looked at Renshaw. We both knew this was true.

"There's a second part," I said.

"There is," Calloway said. "The Hashishin are still in London. Not many—most have left—but enough. They know I'm here. They know I have the slipper. The minute I leave this building

with it, or the minute it goes back into the museum case, they'll move. The deal doesn't hold while they're here."

"How do we remove them?" Renshaw said.

"We don't remove them," Calloway said. "We give Yusuf what he's been asking for since October. The slipper, on terms he can accept, delivered tonight." He paused. "With one addition."

He reached inside his coat and placed the slipper on the desk between us.

It sat there, as it had sat in its case and in a niche in a dungeon and in the coat of a running man on a museum roof—small, ancient, dull red, entirely unremarkable to the eye—and the room around it went very quiet.

"In exchange for the slipper," Calloway said, "Yusuf of Aleppo swears to withdraw his interest from every person in this room, permanently. Me, Sarelle, Brennan, you." He glanced at Renshaw. "Sworn by the Prophet. Binding."

"And if he refuses?" Renshaw said.

Calloway produced a lighter from his pocket and set it on the desk beside the slipper.

The room was very quiet.

"That is an extraordinary thing to threaten," Renshaw said, after a moment.

"It's a negotiation," Calloway said. "The lighter is the negotiating tool." He looked at it. "He will not refuse. The destruction of the slipper is the one outcome he cannot accept. It is worse to him than it remaining in the wrong hands, worse than every failure of the preceding months. He will agree."

I looked at the slipper and the lighter and the fire laid in the grate—I had laid it that morning, before I knew any of this, out of simple habit—and thought about a man in a yellow room who had told me that the relics of the Prophet shared in a spiritual light, and who had spent four months and the lives of his operatives in service of returning one of them.

"He's already outside," I said. I was not entirely certain how I knew this, but I was certain.

Calloway looked at me.

"He's been outside since you arrived," I said. "He knows you're here. He knows you have it. He's waiting."

Calloway looked at Sarelle. She gave the smallest possible nod.

"Then call him," Calloway said. "He'll come if you call him. He has a—thing, about you, Brennan. I don't know exactly what it is, but it's there."

I went to the window. The courtyard below was dark and empty, in the way it had been dark and empty on a dozen previous occasions when it had not actually been either.

I opened the window. The January air came in.

"Yusuf!" I called. The name went out into the dark courtyard and the still street beyond, as it had once before in a Warwickshire garden in a different winter. "*Yusuf of Aleppo!*"

A silence.

Then, from the shadow at the far side of the courtyard, where the lamp does not reach, a tall figure stepped into the light.

"I hear, *effendim*," he said. His voice carried in the cold air with perfect clarity. "I am ready. Open the door."

CHAPTER THIRTY

MY LAST MEETING WITH YUSUF OF ALEPPO

Yusuf entered alone.

He was in dark European clothes, the green sharif's turban above the collar of his coat, and he came in with the quality of presence that had made every room he entered, over the preceding months, somewhat smaller and more serious. He did not look at me or at Renshaw. He crossed directly to the chair across from Calloway and sat, and for a long moment the two of them looked at each other: the one-handed American in the wide-brimmed hat and the self-appointed guardian of the Prophet's relic, face to face at last in a flat off Fleet Street in January.

"You are a remarkable man," Yusuf said, finally. He said it without pleasure, as a statement of fact that he would have preferred not to be making.

"I appreciate that," Calloway said.

I had laid the fire but not yet lit it. Calloway's lighter was on the desk. The slipper was in his left hand, and every person in the room was aware of all three things in exactly the proportions Calloway had intended.

"You know what I am proposing," Calloway said.

"I know what you are threatening," Yusuf said.

"They're the same thing. The slipper returned to you tonight—directly, finally, with no further conditions except one. You give your word, sworn by the Prophet, on whom be peace, that you withdraw your interest from everyone in this room.

Permanently. Me. Sarelle. Brennan. Inspector Renshaw. No further pursuit. No penalty visited. The matter concluded."

Yusuf's eyes moved to Renshaw, who was standing near the wall with the particular stillness of a professional waiting for events to reach a point he can act on. Then back to Calloway.

"Those who have handled the sacred receptacle—" he began.

"I'm offering you the slipper back," Calloway said, with the quiet, absolute patience of a man who has been preparing this sentence for four months. "Tonight. In your hands. To take back to wherever it belongs and keep there for as long as it needs to be kept." He held it up, briefly, and then he picked up the lighter with the same hand. "Or I burn it here and you go home without it. Those are the two outcomes available."

The room was very quiet. Outside, London moved past with its permanent indifference to whatever was happening inside any particular building.

I had been watching Yusuf's face throughout the conversation and what I saw in it now was not, precisely, anger. It was the expression of a man confronting the horizon of a situation he has been moving towards for a very long time, and finding that the horizon has been moved.

"You understand what you are threatening to destroy," he said.

"I understand what I would be burning," Calloway said. "A fragment of moroccan leather, centuries old, of incalculable significance to a very great many Muslims, that was taken from where it belonged by a man who had been trusted with access to it

and that has been in the wrong hands, mine included, for the better part of a year." He looked at Yusuf. "Burning it is not my preference. Returning it to you is. But I will burn it rather than go home the way I came."

Another silence.

"The oath," Yusuf said at last. "What I am asked to swear. By the law of our order I am bound to visit—"

"I know what you're bound to do," Calloway said. "I'm asking you to set it aside. For the people in this room. In exchange for this." He held the slipper steady. "There will be no charges brought regarding the deaths and mutilations in this country. Inspector Renshaw has confirmed as much. There will be no pursuit. You leave England tonight and you are left to leave it."

Yusuf looked at Renshaw, who gave the smallest possible nod.

Then Yusuf looked at me.

I don't know what he saw. I know what I was thinking, which was about the chain of events that had begun with Marchmont on a ship and had brought us all to this room: the deaths, the severed hands, the yellow room and the dungeon and the long months of watching and being watched. And underneath all of it, persistent and uncomfortable, the fact that the original act—Marchmont taking the slipper from a place of sacred trust—had been wrong. That the pursuit of it had been wrong in its methods and not wrong in its purpose. That the room we were all standing in was, in some measure, a room of people who had been in the wrong, all of them, in varying degrees, for varying reasons.

Yusuf's eyes stayed on my face for a moment longer than on anyone else's.

"Dark are the ways," he said. It was not directed at anyone in particular. It was the statement of a man arriving at a conclusion that the preceding months have been making inevitable. "It is the will of God."

He rose.

He extended his right hand towards Calloway.

Calloway placed the slipper in it.

Yusuf closed his fingers around it with the careful precision of someone receiving back something that has been absent too long. He stood for a moment with it in his hand, not looking at any of us, and the room held the particular silence of something that has been in motion for a very long time and has finally stopped.

Then he turned to me.

"*Es-salam 'aleykum*," I said.

He looked at me with those eagle eyes for the last time. "You have been honest throughout, *effendim*," he said. "More honest than your situation required. And you have kept your word, even when keeping it cost you." He paused. "These things are not forgotten."

"*Wa-'aleykum*," he said. And went.

Renshaw opened the door and closed it after him, and we stood in the study and listened.

From outside—from the courtyard and the street beyond it and then from somewhere further, fading as we listened—came a sound:

low, rhythmic, the same sound that Lockhart had heard coming from the lower decks of the *Khedive Star* in the Red Sea, and that I had heard since in various forms at various distances. The sound of the Hashishin at their devotions, or at their departure, or at both—the two were, for them, probably not distinct. It rose slightly and fell and moved away into the January dark of London and did not come back.

We stood in silence until it was gone.

Then Renshaw, who had been a police officer for twenty-two years and was not given to ceremony, said: "Right. Mr. Calloway. I need a statement."

"You'll have it," Calloway said. "Remotely. Within forty-eight hours of leaving the country." He met Renshaw's gaze with the directness that was his most consistent characteristic. "I've given you Yusuf's Kent address, his London safe house locations, the operational details of four months of Hashishin activity in this city. That is worth the arrangement we discussed. You know it is."

Renshaw looked at him for a long moment. "Forty-eight hours," he said.

"Forty-eight hours."

Renshaw picked up his coat. He looked around the study—at the fire I had laid and not lit, at the desk with the lighter still on it, at the empty chair where Yusuf had sat—and then he looked at me.

"I'll want a full account from you as well," he said. "In writing. Everything."

"You'll have it," I said.

He nodded, and went.

Sarelle came to stand beside Calloway. She was looking at the desk where the slipper had been, and her expression had the quality of the aftermath of something that has required a very great deal of sustained effort—not relief exactly, and not happiness, but the specific exhaustion of someone who has been holding a very heavy thing for a very long time and has finally been permitted to set it down.

"Well," said Calloway.

"Well," I said.

He looked at me with those watchful, faintly amused eyes one last time. "You've been fair with this, Brennan. From the beginning."

"So have you," I said. "In your way."

Something crossed his face that might, in different circumstances, have become a smile. He put on his Stetson, which he had kept on throughout the entire proceeding. Sarelle picked up her bag. They went.

I stood alone in my study. The fire was laid. I lit it.

I sat in the chair across from the one Yusuf had occupied, and I watched the fire, and I thought about Marchmont, who had taken a thing that was not his to take and had paid for it with his life. About the museum case, which would stand empty now for as long as it took to explain. About Yusuf of Aleppo, who had been in my study and my flat and my dreams for four months, and who was gone into the London night with the thing he had come

for, and whom I would not see again. About a fragment of ancient Moroccan leather that had been in the wrong place for the better part of a year and was going back to the right one, and about whether that was a good ending or simply an ending.

I did not arrive at a conclusion. I am not sure there was one available.

Outside, London went about its business. The fire settled. The lighter was still on the desk.

The affair of the Scimitar of Yusuf was ended.