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THE VEILED CITY
Tales of Old Cairo
A Neil Greaves Casebook
by Alan H. Gael

About 47,000 words

CHAPTER ONE

THE YASHMAK OF PEARLS

The *dhuhr* call to prayer had just sounded from the minarets of the Mosque of al-Nasir Muhammad, and I was watching, from the comfortable shade of Hamid's café, whether the coppersmiths of the *Suk en-Nahhassin* would pause for it or not, when my attention was suddenly and completely arrested.

A lean man in a pale *galabiyya* was sitting on the step of the gateway across the lane. He had been there some time—I had registered him, vaguely, as part of the ordinary furniture of the street—but I looked at him properly now and saw what I had not registered before: that with his one living eye he was watching my friend Ali Mohammed with an intensity of focused malice that, even at this distance, caused me an involuntary chill.

I should say something about myself, since my circumstances bear directly on what follows. I am Neil Greaves, a freelance cultural correspondent of uncertain reputation and, I like to think, rather better-developed instincts. My work appears in *The Antiquarian Review*, in a handful of specialist publications that are read by people who make it their business to know the price of things, and in the occasional feature for one of the serious Sunday newspapers when I can persuade them that Islamic art and archaeology merit two thousand words and a respectable fee. I also serve as a consultant to Pendleton & Morne, Cultural Acquisitions, of Mayfair, London—a firm whose regard for the precise provenance of the objects it handles is, I will say

charitably, flexible. I had been resident in Cairo for four years, in a top-floor flat above a second-hand book dealer in the Gamaleya district, from which I could see, on a clear morning, the domes and minarets of half a dozen of the finest mosques in the world. I spoke enough Arabic to manage in the market and to understand, with reasonable accuracy, what people said when they thought I could not.

What had made me, over those four years, something more than a tourist and something less than a Cairene was the compound of qualities required by my trade: patience, a constitutionally low boredom threshold, and what my friend Dr. Rashwan—who is a psychiatrist and therefore paid to name such things—refers to as a pathological inability to leave well enough alone. I prefer to call it professional curiosity.

On this particular Tuesday in April, I had been at Hamid's café since half past ten, working on a piece about Fatimid architectural tile-work that had been commissioned by a journal that paid on time. Hamid makes excellent coffee and speaks only when spoken to, which makes him ideal company for a working morning. The coppersmiths produced their constant percussion of hammered metal around us, and at the shop directly across the lane, Ali Mohammed, my old friend and the most fluent liar in the antiques trade of the Islamic Quarter, was explaining to a German tourist that the brass bowl she was examining dated from the Ottoman period.

I watched with the appreciation one reserves for a true craftsman at work, because the bowl was, in my opinion, late

Victorian, and Ali Mohammed, who knew this perfectly well, was constructing a provenance for it with the calm confidence of a man who has thoroughly memorised his material. The tourist wore the expression of someone who had come a great distance to buy something genuinely old and was very nearly persuaded.

The coppersmiths had not, on the whole, paused for the noon prayer. A few had briefly set down their hammers; most had not. This is the practical Islam of craftsmen, which I have always respected more in Cairo than the demonstrative varieties. It is the religion of men who have too much work to do to interrupt it on principle, and who have arranged a quiet private understanding with God accordingly.

It was at the moment when the German tourist finally departed with her bowl and Ali Mohammed turned back to his stool that I looked properly at the man in the gateway.

He was lean, perhaps sixty years old, in a pale *galabiyya* of no distinguishable colour. He sat on the low step as though he had been there a long time and intended to remain. His right eye—his living eye—was directed at Ali Mohammed with an attention I can only describe as murderous: not the hot variety that word usually implies, but the cold, patient, decided kind, the look of a man who has made a calculation and is waiting for the conditions to act upon it. His left eye was glass, and tracked very slightly to the right of wherever the living eye was directed. It gave his face an asymmetry that was more unsettling, in its way, than a straightforward disfigurement would have been.

I sipped my coffee and lit a cigarette and continued, with the trained carelessness that long practice in interesting places makes habitual, to look at everything except the man in the gateway.

When the tourist had gone, Ali Mohammed came over to join me at my table. He did it in the way he has—a sideways, apologetic shuffle, as though perpetually excusing himself for his own presence—and accepted the empty chair with a murmured greeting. His round, ordinarily amiable face was perceptibly paler than usual, and there was a quality in his expression that I recognised, after a moment, as the specific look of a man who knows he is being watched and is trying very hard to appear entirely unaware of it.

"You are not well, my friend," I said.

"On the contrary, ya Greaves," he said, too quickly. "Perfectly well. The heat, perhaps." He passed a hand over his brow, which was damp, and moistened his lips. He had not looked at the gateway.

"There is a man sitting in the shadow of that gate across the street," I said pleasantly, "who appears to take a remarkable interest in you."

I glanced towards the gateway. The step was empty. The man had vanished with the unhurried efficiency of someone accustomed to vanishing, and who knows the streets. Ali Mohammed, following my glance, released a long, slow exhalation that seemed to have been stored under considerable pressure.

"He is one of the people of Abu Zahir," he said, in a voice I had to lean forward to hear properly.

I told him the name meant nothing to me.

"Abu Zahir is not a man to explain in a café," said Ali Mohammed. He was already rising. "Forgive me. I must return to the shop." He was gone before I could ask anything further, the beaded curtain of his doorway swinging behind him.

I finished my coffee and looked at the half-completed paragraph about Fatimid tile-glazing on my screen and found it entirely unconvincing. The name Abu Zahir had taken up residence in my mind with the unreasonable tenacity of a half-heard tune.

I was still puzzling over it when, twenty minutes later, I packed up my laptop and started towards the *al-Muizz*. The lane had quieted after the noon crowd, and I had turned into a narrower passage near the Mosque of al-Salih Tala'i when I heard a shout from behind me—or thought I did—and turned.

The hood came down over my head from behind.

I have a piece of advice from a security consultant I worked with in Beirut some years ago that has proved more practically useful than anything I learned at university: the first ten seconds decide everything; after that, you negotiate. I did not struggle. I was lifted from the ground by at least two pairs of hands with the efficient competence of people who have done this before, and carried down what I counted as seven stone steps into a space that was cool and smelled of damp plaster and very faintly of incense. My wrists were held, not painfully. Hands

went through my pockets with practised speed: phone, wallet, press card, cigarettes. All were returned.

This was the part that required some adjustment. Thieves do not return wallets.

The hood was lifted. I was in a basement room beneath one of the old merchant houses of the quarter—moderate in size, lit by a single bulb on an old wire, pale plaster walls and a floor of ancient stone flags, cool in the way of rooms that have not seen sun in centuries. Behind me stood a large man in dark clothes who held the sacking hood in one hand and stood with the still, balanced posture of someone with specific physical training. Before me, his hands crossed on the handle of an ebony cane with a silver tip, stood a man I had not seen before.

He was perhaps forty, though he possessed the quality—common to certain ascetics—of belonging to no particular age. He wore a dark *gibbeh* over a white shirt, and a turban of white cotton wound with great precision. He had a short, close-trimmed black beard, perfectly maintained. His face was direct and rather spare—the face of a man to whom the unnecessary costs something. His eyes were very dark and absolutely calm, possessed of the quality one occasionally encounters in senior surgeons and very experienced judges: the quality of a mind that has already processed the immediate situation three steps ahead of the present moment.

He addressed me first in Arabic. Then, apparently reading something in my expression, he shifted without pause to English that was precise, measured, and almost entirely without accent.

"I regret the discourtesy of your arrival," he said. "It was not what I would have chosen. If you are willing to accept my assurance that you are in no danger and that this will take very little of your time, I will explain the reason for this inconvenience."

"Provisionally," I said.

The faintest intimation of something—the distant advance notice of a smile—appeared at the corner of his mouth and was immediately recalled. "You are Neil Greaves. You write for *The Antiquarian Review* and consult for Pendleton & Morne of London. You have lived in the Gamaleya for four years. You speak Arabic adequately, though not as well as you believe you do. You are on comfortable terms with several dozen dealers in objects of historical significance in this quarter, a number of whom are known to the authorities." He regarded me steadily. "Have I described you accurately?"

"The Arabic is uncharitably assessed," I said. "Otherwise, yes."

"I am Ibrahim Abu Zahir. I serve as imam at the Mosque of al-Salih in this quarter. I also act, in an informal capacity, as a custodian of certain objects and properties that fall within the spiritual and historical jurisdiction of the shrines of the old city." He paused. "I wished to meet you. I also wished to inspect your phone, which has been done. There may be a conversation we need to have in the near future. Whether we do will depend on certain choices you make in the coming days."

"You could have knocked on my door."

"I could have. And you might not have been home, or might have declined to open it. This way, I know with certainty that I have your attention."

"You have it," I said. "Good afternoon, Sheikh."

He inclined his head with a gravity that left me nothing further to say, and indicated the stairs. The large man stood aside. I went up.

I sat for a long time afterward in Hamid's café with a third coffee I did not need, thinking about what had just happened. Abu Zahir had told me almost nothing: he had said, with the precision of a man who calibrates his words, that a conversation *might* be necessary. The conditional was deliberate. It meant that whatever was in motion was not yet complete, and that my role in it was still to be determined. It was a very effective way of ensuring that a man of my temperament would not rest until he found out what that role was.

The message from Ali Mohammed came at seven that evening on WhatsApp: brief and businesslike. I gave him the address—which he already knew—and put the kettle on.

He arrived forty minutes later, looking better than he had at the café but still carrying about him the air of a man who has been wearing his nerves on the outside and is attempting to rearrange them. He sat in the chair by the window and accepted his tea, and then—with the economical circumlocution that has always made him a pleasure to negotiate with—explained what had happened since I last saw him.

That afternoon, while he had been drawn away from his shop by a message he now believed to have been fabricated, someone had searched his premises with professional thoroughness. Nothing was missing. Two hours later, walking home, he had been stopped by two men he did not recognise and searched in the street with the same polite competence. His wallet, phone, and keys had been returned. Nothing taken.

"They know I have something," he said. "Or that I had it. I moved it this morning, after what happened at the shop. But they don't know that yet."

What he had moved was a small sandalwood box. The box contained a veil—a silk veil of very considerable antiquity and, in certain circles, immense spiritual significance. He had acquired it through a chain of dealers he preferred not to specify in full, and he had been holding it for a buyer: a woman of some prominence in her particular world, known by the name Shahmarah, residing in the private wing of a villa in Zamalek that belonged to a property developer named Yusuf al-Nasr.

"The people who searched your shop," I said. "They work for Abu Zahir."

He looked at his tea. "You know of him."

"We were introduced today. Informally. What exactly is in the box?"

He told me, after a pause in which I could see him weighing honesty against economy, and to his credit opting for honesty. The veil was the *yashmak* of Sayyida Nafisa—the embroidered face-veil attributed to the great scholar and holy woman who had come

to Cairo in the ninth century, taught *hadith* to al-Shafi'i himself, and whose tomb in the City of the Dead drew thousands of pilgrims each year. It had been in the keeping of the *waqf* authority associated with her shrine for generations. Its absence from the reliquary had not, he said carefully, yet been made publicly known.

I thought about this for a moment. Sayyida Nafisa is not a distant historical figure in Cairo; she is present in the daily life of the city in a way the secular European mind finds difficult to calibrate. Her shrine is visited not by scholars but by ordinary people—women who come to pray for the health of a child, men who come in grief or gratitude. The *yashmak*, if genuine, was not an antique or a collector's object. It was a sacred thing in the fullest sense of the word.

I held these thoughts for approximately thirty seconds. Then I thought about Pendleton & Morne's client in Dubai, who paid significant sums for authenticated Islamic textiles and did not inquire too closely into provenance.

"You want me to deliver it," I said.

He confirmed, with the careful courtesy that has always made him so agreeable to negotiate with, that he was offering me a commission of two thousand pounds sterling—ten percent of the twenty thousand the lady had agreed to pay—to deliver the sandalwood box to the side entrance of the Villa al-Nasr, collect the agreed sum, and return with it. He would provide me with a signet ring—bronze, with a stylized bird—that would serve as my introduction to the household. The transaction required, for

reasons he left tactfully unspecified, that I present myself in some form of disguise, as the household was unaccustomed to European visitors.

I said I would consider it and let him know by morning. We went downstairs together and I saw him to the street door.

The lane was quiet: a family eating on their doorstep two buildings along, a moped propped against the wall, the distant noise of traffic from the *al-Muizz*. Ali Mohammed said his goodnight and set off towards the main road.

He had gone perhaps eight paces when two figures came out of the shadow of a doorway ahead of him. What followed was brief and not gentle—Ali Mohammed was on the pavement with a knee in his back before I had fully processed what was happening—and the second man went through his jacket pockets with efficient speed. From inside the scuffle, as the man cleared the jacket, two small objects rolled free and skittered across the old stone flags towards the wall at my foot: a bronze ring with a stylized bird on its face, and a small oblong box of pale sandalwood wrapped in red thread that had come partially undone.

I stood very still for approximately one second. Then I bent and picked them up and put them in my pocket.

The two men found nothing further. They hauled Ali Mohammed upright, said something I did not catch, and disappeared into a side lane. Ali Mohammed straightened his jacket with the expression of a man arranging his dignity after an indignity. He looked up and down the lane, and then at me, and the look lasted

long enough to tell me that he had either seen or inferred exactly what had happened.

"*Alhamdulillah*," he said quietly, and walked away.

I went upstairs and examined my acquisitions under the lamp.

The sandalwood box fit comfortably in the palm of my hand. Inside it, nested in a second box of very old silver, was the veil. I lifted it out with both hands, laid it on the table, and looked at it for a long time.

I have handled important textile relics in the course of my work—fragments of Coptic tapestry, medieval brocades, early Islamic embroideries that have passed through dealers' hands into sale rooms. They impress you through your knowledge rather than your instincts; you recognise their significance because you understand what you are looking at.

This was different. The silk was so fine that when I lifted a corner to the lamp the light shone through it as through a cloud, and the pearls—small, graduated, applied in a density and regularity that implied a craftsman of quite extraordinary patience and skill—shimmered with the warm lustre of things that have been loved over many centuries. It was very old. I cannot date textiles with specialist confidence, but the character of the embroidery spoke of a period long before anything that could plausibly be replicated. It measured perhaps thirty centimetres by forty-five and weighed almost nothing.

I wrapped it in its silver box and the silver box in its sandalwood case, placed the case in the locked drawer beneath my desk—the one with the secondary lock that does not advertise

itself as a lock—and went to bed with the considered intention of visiting, before dawn, the workshop of Suleyman Levi.

I woke at three in the morning with the certain knowledge that I was not alone in the flat.

It was not a sound that woke me—something subtler: the particular quality of air in a room that contains another person. I lay still for a moment, orienting myself in the dark. Then I reached, with controlled deliberateness, for the drawer of the bedside table, where I keep a compact Beretta licensed by the Egyptian Firearms Authority and renewed annually with the assistance of a colleague at the Ministry of Interior who owes me a favour.

“There is no need for that,” said Abu Zahir, from the armchair beside the bookcase.

I took the Beretta anyway and sat up. He was sitting in the perfect stillness of a man who has been in the dark for some time and is comfortable with it—hands on the ebony cane, expression composed and entirely unsurprised.

“Good morning, Sheikh,” I said. “I won’t offer you tea.”

“I have everything I need, thank you.” He looked at me steadily. “I believe you have something I am looking for.”

“Something found me,” I said. “It is different.”

“Perhaps.” He was silent for a moment. “I will tell you what you have, in case any part of it is not entirely clear to you. What is in that drawer”—he indicated the desk with the faintest movement of the cane, without looking at it—“is the *yashmak* of Sayyida Nafisa. It was removed from her shrine three months ago.

It has passed through several hands since then. I have been attempting to recover it." He paused. "I cannot enter the private residence of Yusuf al-Nasr uninvited. He is a believer and his household is his own. The woman who has purchased the *yashmak* from Ali Mohammed believes she already possesses it—she does not know that the box she is expecting has not yet reached her. That is the current state of affairs." He looked at me with those very still, very dark eyes. "You, on the other hand, have everything required to complete this delivery. And I am prepared to make it worth your while to deliver the *yashmak* to me instead of to its buyer."

"How worth my while?"

"Your commission from Ali Mohammed, which I will cover. Two thousand pounds additional, from the resources of the *waqf*. Six thousand in total." A brief pause. "And the knowledge that a sacred thing has been returned to the people to whom it belongs. I mention this last point for completeness only."

"As you should," I said. "Six thousand is adequate. Tell me about the villa."

He told me, with the systematic precision of someone who has gathered intelligence carefully: the Villa al-Nasr in Zamalek, the side entrance used for private visitors, the guard who admitted them, the young attendant named Safiyeh who served Shahmarah's household, the layout of the private wing. He described Shahmarah herself—a former entertainer and dancer of Iranian-Egyptian descent, accustomed to luxury and to obtaining what she wanted, possessed of the specific sharp intelligence of

someone who has climbed a long distance without institutional assistance. He described her with something that I recognised, after reflection, as a kind of neutral respect: he disapproved of the transaction she was engaged in without disapproving of her as a person, which struck me as a morally sophisticated distinction.

When he had finished, he rose from the armchair, inclined his head in that grave way of his, and crossed to the window. He stepped out onto the narrow external ledge with the ease of long familiarity.

"Good night, Mr. Greaves," he said, and was gone.

I lay in the dark for some time, attending less comfortably than I might have wished to the ease with which a man of his size had come and gone through a window four floors above the lane. Then I took out my phone and composed a careful message to Suleyman Levi.

Suleyman is, technically, an embroiderer and silversmith of the old quarter. This understates matters to the point of absurdity. He is in his late sixties, the last member of a family that has worked in fine textiles and precious metalwork in the Gamaleya since before the Ottoman period, and over the years I had known him he had produced, to private commission, objects of sufficient authenticity to pass preliminary inspection at two major London auction houses and one national museum. He is not a forger. He makes explicit replicas for collectors who wish to display an object while protecting the original, and what third parties subsequently do with those replicas is entirely outside his control.

At five in the morning I was in his workshop behind the Mosque of Suleyman Pasha, which smells permanently of thread and fine metal and old wool and the particular dry warmth of productive occupation spread over many centuries. I showed him the veil under his lamp. He handled it with cotton gloves, in complete silence, for a full five minutes. Then he put it down and looked at me with the expression he reserves for problems he finds genuinely interesting.

"Four days," I said.

"Two," he said. "Without interruption. And it will cost you considerably."

I left the original with him and walked home in the pale early light. The old city is at its most genuinely itself in the hour before dawn—the lanes empty, the air cool and almost still, the minarets pale against a sky shifting through grey into the first suggestion of blue. I was, it is fair to say, in a state of considerable professional satisfaction.

The arrangement, as I reviewed it, was elegant. Abu Zahir believed he had commissioned me to retrieve the *yashmak* from Shahmarah and deliver it to him. Shahmarah believed she was waiting to receive the *yashmak* from Ali Mohammed's messenger, having already paid twenty thousand pounds for it. Pendleton & Morne in London had not yet been informed of the veil's existence. The two replicas Suleyman would produce—for I intended to ask for two, not one—would serve their respective purposes admirably. One for Shahmarah, one for Abu Zahir. The original

would go by international courier to Mayfair. The symmetry of this arrangement gave me considerable satisfaction.

Two nights later, a black-clad and considerably stooped elderly woman paused before the side gate of the Villa al-Nasr in Zamalek at nine in the evening, rapped three times slowly and then twice rapidly, and waited. I was the elderly woman. The *abaya* was genuine and old, borrowed from a theatrical colleague who owed me a favour, and the *niqab*, combined with the stoop I had spent two days rehearsing, added an estimated decade to my apparent age. Abu Zahir, who had insisted on accompanying me as far as the street, had assessed the result with a single measured look and said, with the economy of a man who does not waste superlatives, "It will serve." He waited in a car across the road while the gate opened.

The man who admitted me was large, professional, and uninterested in conversation. He examined the signet ring—held up for him in a gloved hand—checked it against some private mental record, and stood aside. I was conducted through a walled garden fragrant with jasmine and the sound of a small fountain, to a door in the east wing of the villa where Shahmarah maintained her private apartment. A young woman—Safiyeh, as I had been briefed—took me up a narrow stair without speaking and left me briefly in an anteroom before beckoning me through.

The room I found on the other side is difficult to describe without the kind of hyperbole I generally try to avoid. It was large and very warmly lit and furnished with the considered excess of someone who has taste, money, and a particular pleasure

in ensuring that both are apparent. At its far end, on a low divan heaped with cushions and silk, sat Shahmarah.

She was perhaps thirty-five years old and possessed, in whatever combination of genetics and intention produced it, one of the most immediately arresting faces I have encountered. High cheekbones, very dark eyes of unusual expressiveness and considerable intelligence, hair pinned up with the sort of studied simplicity that requires more effort than it displays. She wore a great deal of jewelry and wore it well. She was also watching me with the attentiveness of someone who has spent a portion of her life calculating the intentions of strangers at close range, and who has become very proficient at it.

We conducted our preliminary exchange in the established manner—she asking for the veil, I requesting payment; I demurring; she escalating—both of us performing our respective roles with the competence of people who have done this kind of negotiating before, in various registers. The money came from a lacquered cabinet across the room: padded envelopes that Safiyeh counted out onto a side table with the brisk unconcern of someone shelling peas. It was two thousand short of the agreed sum. I insisted, with the querulous tenacity of the very old, that the full amount must be paid. Shahmarah pulled an emerald ring from her right hand and dropped it on top of the money with a magnificent contempt that I found, under the circumstances, rather admirable.

I secured the money and the ring in the bag beneath my robes and set on the table the silk-wrapped package that Suleyman had delivered to my flat that morning.

She took it, unwrapped it, and held it under the lamp. Suleyman had surpassed himself. The pearls—cultured Japanese, selected by lustre and size with extraordinary care over two sleepless days—shone in a pattern that reproduced the original with the fidelity of a great copy. She raised it in both hands and held it before her face, looking at herself in the long mirror across the room, and the expression that came over her was not what I had expected. It was not triumph or greed or the satisfaction of acquisition. It was something quieter and more complicated—private, carried a long time—as though the veil was connected for her to some need or grief or memory that had nothing to do with its monetary value. I looked away. There are moments one does not watch.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "Go."

I went. Safiyeh led me back down the narrow stair. At the bottom she opened the door to the garden and I stepped into the warm night air and the jasmine, and the guard who had admitted me was standing in the shadow beside the door with a forearm already lifting.

I had half-expected it. The forearm caught my upraised arm rather than my throat. I drove my left elbow back hard into his solar plexus, turned inside the grip as he folded, and walked towards the gate at a pace that was not quite a run. I let myself

out with the key I had palmed from the lock on my way in, and the car was exactly where it should have been.

Abu Zahir said nothing as we pulled away from the kerb. I pressed into his hands the second of Suleyman's replicas, wrapped in cloth inside a wooden box. He opened it and examined it in the glow of his phone's torch—carefully, with the hands of a man holding something that means something to him. He closed the box and held it on his lap, looking out at the lights of Zamalek passing in the dark. An envelope passed between us in the other direction. I put it in my pocket without counting it, which seemed appropriate to the circumstances.

He dropped me at the corner of the Gamaleya and the car moved away into the night. I walked the remaining distance home in the cooling air, thinking, as I sometimes do in the aftermath of complicated events, about what had actually just happened.

Upstairs, I made tea and sat at my desk and took from the locked drawer the original *yashmak* of Sayyida Nafisa and looked at it one last time.

There are moments in my line of work when the internal argument stops. I could construct the case for sending it to Dubai; I could also construct the case against. On that particular evening I did not feel like constructing cases. I wrapped it in acid-free tissue, placed it in a padded envelope, addressed it to Pendleton & Morne in Mayfair with a note describing what it was and what I believed it to be worth, and the following morning at half past eight walked it to the DHL office on the Sharia Ramses and handed it over.

Nine days later I received the following email from Lloyd Llewellyn, Director of Acquisitions, Pendleton & Morne.

Dear Greaves—we are returning herewith the embroidered veil you describe as the authentic yashmak of Sayyida Nafisa. Your suggestion that this object might realise a considerable sum does not interest us, and we do not expect a consultant of your supposed competence to send us what is, with very little respect, an obvious reproduction. The pearls are a creditable attempt. The silk is demonstrably of modern manufacture. We are not, as you know, in the market for well-made forgeries.

Lloyd Llewellyn, Director of Acquisitions.

I stared at this email for a considerable time. Then I opened the padded envelope that had arrived in the same post.

Suleyman's work. I recognised it immediately—the slight evenness of the embroidery, the microscopic regularity that no medieval hand would have produced, the weight of the silk fractionally but definitively wrong. A very good replica. Not, by any standard, the original.

I sat back and thought through the sequence with great care. I had placed the original in the locked drawer the night I acquired it. The following morning at five I had taken it to Suleyman's workshop, remained with him for two hours, and left the veil with him. I had returned to my flat at approximately seven. The DHL package had been posted nine days later, during which time the original had sat, as I believed, undisturbed in the locked drawer.

Except for the four hours I had spent at the Villa al-Nasr. During which time I had been reliably away from the flat, and the original had been in the locked drawer, and the flat had been, as I had assumed, securely empty.

I remembered, now, that the keypad on the drawer had been blinking in a particular way when I returned that night—the way it blinks when the battery has been briefly disconnected and the internal memory cleared. I had attributed it to a battery irregularity and thought nothing more of it.

I understood now, with great clarity, the nature of that very slight, very private, very contained suggestion of a smile that Ibrahim Abu Zahir had permitted himself when I pressed the second reliquary into his hands in the car.

He had arrived in my flat during my four hours in Zamalek—the only window of time in which I was verifiably absent. He had opened the drawer. He had exchanged Suleyman's second replica for the original, which I had sealed in its wrappings and left for posting. He had then graciously accepted six thousand pounds for what was, by any objective standard, a very creditable forgery—which was, I found it difficult to argue with the principle, perfectly fair, given that I had proposed to give him a forgery first.

The *yashmak* was, therefore, where it had been heading from the beginning: back in the keeping of a man who had devoted himself to protecting the sacred objects of this quarter, and who had achieved this purpose with a thoroughness and an economy that

left me with nothing whatsoever to complain of except my own assumptions.

Outside, the afternoon *asr* call to prayer began from the minarets of al-Husayn, and the old city produced its customary response: some people pausing, most not. Somewhere in the Gamaleya, a quietly formidable man was conducting his afternoon prayers, and nearby, in a sandalwood box, the veil of Sayyida Nafisa was resting in its proper custody.

I poured myself a measure of whisky—the one Western habit I have never successfully abandoned—and considered at some length how substantially I was going to have to adjust my methods if I intended to continue operating in this city at the level I aspired to. The adjustments, I concluded, were going to be considerable. I was, however, and somewhat to my own surprise, already looking forward to the next encounter.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DEATH-RING OF SNEFERU

The band had just finished its first set when Theo Marsh, who was on his third whisky and whose company I was tolerating with diminishing patience, leaned across the table of the rooftop bar in Garden City and told me, in the confidential undertone he apparently reserved for anything he considered significant, that he had something very big in hand.

He glanced sideways at the couple seated nearest us—an American journalist and her husband, who were paying no attention whatsoever to anything beyond their own conversation—then looked back at me with the look of a man who expects to be envied. The Nile was visible below us between the buildings, dark and barely lit, moving with its ancient and complete indifference to the conversations of people on its banks.

I should say something in Marsh's defense. He worked for Carver & Staines, Cultural Acquisitions, of Mayfair, which made him a professional counterpart of sorts—we circulated in the same grey market without precisely competing for the same objects—and he was, in most practical respects, more than adequately competent. His only observable defect was that he was too much in love with his own competence, which is an error many people make in Cairo, where the city's ancient and inexhaustible patience tends to wait for precisely that kind of overconfidence before arranging the appropriate correction. I have thought a great deal

more kindly of Theo Marsh since that evening. I wish that thought had occurred to me at the time.

"A ring," he said. "Pre-Dynastic, possibly earlier. The oldest verified pharaonic signet in private circulation, if my information is right—which it is." He sat back with the look of a man who expects you to request details.

I did not request details. I am not proud of this. At the time I considered it a simple failure of interest; I understand now that it was a failure of attention to something that mattered, and the distinction has since become important to me.

We parted at the lift with the standard pleasantries of colleagues who will always be acquaintances and never friends. By the time I was climbing the stairs to my flat in the Gamaleya, I had largely forgotten about Theo Marsh and his ring.

I had been home for perhaps twenty minutes when I saw the message from Abu Zahir.

It had arrived on WhatsApp while I was on the terrace, timed at nine forty-two. It contained an image—a photograph of a sheet of white paper on which had been drawn in black ink a single hieroglyphic: the Set-animal, the strange composite creature with the curved snout and square-topped ears that serves in the ancient Egyptian pantheon as the symbol of Seth, god of chaos and disruption. Below the drawing, in Abu Zahir's precise hand, two lines of English: *Grave danger is associated with this sign. Avoid any contact with an object bearing it, or with anyone who has handled such an object. I will explain when I am able. I.A.T.*

I know Egyptian hieroglyphics well enough for professional use. The Set sign is distinctive and I recognised it immediately. I tried calling Abu Zahir and received no answer, which was consistent with every previous attempt I had made to reach him directly; he communicates on his own terms and at his own schedule, and I had by this point learned that waiting was always more effective than pressing. I sent a reply asking for clarification, photographed the image, and forwarded it to an Egyptologist I knew at the University of Cairo, asking if she could tell me the specific symbolic context of the configuration shown. Then I put the phone down and went to make tea, and found Hassan al-Sughra standing at my door.

I had known Hassan for three years, since a survey season at Tell Basta where he had been the senior excavation technician and I had been there in a consultancy capacity. He was fifty-eight, lean, with the large careful hands that come from two decades of fieldwork and the particular quality of attention in the eyes that comes from spending those decades watching objects of extraordinary significance get moved from where they belong to where other people want them. He had always struck me as a man of real integrity, which made him, in our shared profession, somewhat complicated to deal with. He had the look now of a man carrying a piece of information that had been pressing against the inside of his chest for some considerable time and had finally decided where to put it.

I gave him tea. He told me his story.

He had spent eleven years of his career at the Pyramid of Meidum, that anomalous and slightly unsettling structure on the western edge of the Fayum depression that rises from the desert in three receding platforms, surrounded by the collapsed debris of its own ancient failure—the oldest pyramid to attempt the true pyramidal form, built for or by the Pharaoh Sneferu in the twenty-sixth century before the current era. Hassan had been there for the second excavation campaign, in the early years of this century, as senior field technician. He described, with the methodical precision I remembered from Tell Basta, a find that had never been reported.

In the King's Chamber—accessible by a descending entrance passage, a horizontal crawl, and a rough shaft cut in the limestone—there is, low in the eastern corner, a crevice in the wall. Hassan had found it during a routine survey and examined it with an endoscope. In the cavity lay a ring of gold bearing a *cartouche* in green faience that he had identified, with cautious certainty, as the throne-name of Sneferu.

He had not reported it. He had left it where it was.

"Why?" I asked.

He looked at his tea. "Two men from the first campaign died within a year of entering that chamber. One was found on the sands at the foot of the pyramid, dead, with no visible cause. The others refused to re-enter. The locals called it the house of a powerful *efrit*." He paused. "I do not believe in *efrit*," he said, in the tone of a man who has said this to himself many times without arriving at complete certainty. "But a ring bearing

the cartouche of Sneferu, sealed in the King's Chamber for four and a half thousand years—there are reasons it was left. I did not feel I had the right to disturb it. And I was also, I will be honest with you, afraid."

He paused again. I waited.

"My wife's treatment costs twelve thousand pounds," he said. "We have borrowed against the house. We have approximately three months."

I looked at him. Hassan al-Sughra was not a man given to either melodrama or manipulation. The information he was offering was worth very considerably more than twelve thousand pounds to the right buyer, and he was asking for the minimum.

"I will need to see it before I can approach anyone," I said. "And I want to think carefully about whether any part of this can be done through proper channels."

"It cannot," said Hassan, with the weary patience of someone who has spent his career navigating the distance between Egyptian antiquities law and Egyptian archaeological reality. "If it could, I would have reported it twenty years ago. I am sorry, ya Greaves."

He left an hour later. I sat for a long time with the image from Abu Zahir on the screen of my phone—the Set-animal, drawn in black ink—and the slow, uncomfortable feeling that these two pieces of the evening were connected in a way I could not yet see. I went to bed without being able to see it.

We drove south on the desert road before dawn the following morning, in a Land Rover that Hassan had borrowed from a

contractor cousin in Saqqara. The road runs south alongside the Nile valley through agricultural land that has been continuously cultivated for longer than almost any other stretch of ground on earth, and I watched it pass with the particular Cairo compound of affection and unease that the city's antiquity always produces in me—the sense of driving through a palimpsest written and overwritten across so many layers of time that the present moment sits on it as thinly as paint on stone.

We reached the market town near the pyramid site by mid-morning and encountered, emerging from the main street into the road ahead of us, a small funeral procession: a bier carried by four men, the white cloth, the clustre of mourners moving in the particular concentrated silence of people accompanying someone to a final destination. Hassan slowed the car and then pulled over without being asked. I glanced at him. His expression had closed in a way I recognised from the previous evening.

"Did you know him?" I asked.

"Not well," said Hassan. "Ahmed Abdalla. He worked excavation sites in this area for thirty years—he was part of the original Meidum workforce, one of the men who fled the pyramid in the first campaign." He paused. "He was found yesterday at the foot of the pyramid. Dead. They say snakebite."

He said the last words in the flat tone of a man who wants me to understand that they imply something without having to make the implication explicit.

"He went in," I said.

Hassan did not answer. He watched the procession out of sight, then pulled back onto the road.

We camped that afternoon on the western side of the pyramid in the lee of the ancient rubbish mound. The structure rises improbably from the flat desert: that extraordinary truncated tower of limestone, seventy metres high, its lower courses buried in the rubble of its own partial collapse, the three stepped platforms above them carrying the exposed core like a monument to ambition checked by physics. I have spent time at most of the major pyramid sites but the Meidum structure has always struck me as the most ancient-feeling of any of them—older in atmosphere than Giza, more isolated, more essentially itself.

Hassan set up camp with the practised efficiency of a man who has spent hundreds of nights in the desert, and then took his field glasses and walked along the base of the rubbish mound, telling me he was reconnoitering the best access route for the evening. I found a position on the north slope where I could see the surrounding desert without being visible from the road, and I sat there for two hours watching the light change across the Fayum depression to the west.

When I returned to camp, Hassan was gone.

His sleeping roll was there. His water bottle. His cigarettes, his small rucksack: all present. I called his name twice. The desert returned nothing but its own silence, and then a faint echo. I waited half an hour. The light was going fast now—the brief Egyptian dusk that exists for perhaps fifteen

minutes between afternoon and full dark—and I faced a choice: go in without him, or abandon the expedition entirely.

I went in without him.

For the descent I had equipped myself with what I had judged necessary: a good headlamp with what I believed were fresh batteries, a backup torch in my cargo pocket, thin gloves, a flat steel tool for working crevices, my phone in an inside jacket pocket. I had dressed practically—light cargo trousers, long-sleeved shirt, rubber-soled shoes. From the entrance at the top of the north face I could see the lights of the Meidum village in the palm groves below, and beyond them the string of headlights on the desert road. I noted the time, noted the temperature, and began the descent.

The passage is approximately seventy metres long at an angle of twenty-eight degrees, and in a fit person takes ten minutes to descend with care. The ancient limestone walls retain the heat of the day; the smell is extraordinary—four and a half thousand years of sealed air and mineral dust and the chemistry of very old organic material, exhaled into the beam of the headlamp in slow increments. I have found, over the years, that the most reliable way to manage the specific vertigo of descending into very old enclosed spaces is not to think about their age, and I kept my attention resolutely on the passage in front of me.

At the bottom: the horizontal section. A crawl of approximately twelve metres through a space perhaps forty centimetres high, ceiling pressing close enough that the headlamp beam showed me nothing but limestone inches from my face, the

smell intensifying, the sound of the passage entirely absorbed by the stone. I moved through it on my elbows with the concentrated economy of motion that tight spaces require. There is a particular quality of concentration available only in places from which retreat is more difficult than advance, and I was making full use of it.

The shaft: three metres of rough climbing, footholds cut four thousand years ago into the limestone by a craftsman whose name and face have been entirely lost, the floor of the King's Chamber appearing above me in the headlamp beam. I pulled myself up and stood in one of the oldest rooms built by human hands, and stood still for a moment, breathing.

The King's Chamber of the Pyramid of Meidum is approximately nine metres by five, and approximately five metres high. Its walls are cut limestone, undecorated. In the eastern corner, low in the wall, is the crevice that Hassan al-Sughra had found twenty years earlier and had not disturbed. I crossed to it, crouched, directed the headlamp beam into it, and reached for my prying tool.

The headlamp died.

No flicker, no warning—simply dark, between one moment and the next, as though the light had been switched off from outside. I tried the housing, tried the switch twice. Nothing. I reached for the backup torch in my cargo pocket and established, with a sinking of the heart that was immediate and physical, that it had been switched on accidentally at some point during the descent and the battery was flat.

I was in the King's Chamber of the Pyramid of Meidum, alone, at night, with no working light source.

I sat down on the chamber floor and did not allow myself to think about the dimensions of the space or the distance to the shaft or the length of the horizontal passage or what the passage smelled like in total darkness. I concentrated on breathing at a normal rate and on the things I actually knew: the chamber had no pits, no drops, no hazards. The shaft was directly behind me and to the right, six metres by my count. The horizontal passage was navigable in darkness if I went slowly and kept contact with the walls. I had entered this building. I could leave it.

In the horizontal passage below me, I heard the sound of someone approaching.

This was not ambiguous. It was the sound of a person moving carefully through a very tight space—the specific scrape and shift of elbows and knees on stone—and it was getting closer. I became aware of, in rapid sequence: the complete absence of my pistol (left in the Land Rover, which in retrospect showed a spectacular lack of foresight), the total darkness, the impossibility of flight, and then, below the lip of the shaft, the appearance of a thin beam of light.

I watched it come. A hand appeared at the edge of the shaft, ivory-coloured in the torchlight, and then a second hand. A white turban, then black-robed shoulders, and the figure pulling itself up with a controlled ease that suggested genuine familiarity with confined spaces. He stood, raised the torch, and we looked at

each other across the darkness of the oldest burial chamber in the world.

"Praise be to God," said Ibrahim Abu Zahir quietly. "I have found you alive."

He looked at me with those very still, very dark eyes, and I thought I detected in them, briefly, something that was not quite his characteristic composure—a residue of genuine concern, quickly settled.

"I am alive," I said. "And the ring is gone. Someone reached the cavity before I did."

"Yes," he said. "I know. Come out. I will tell you everything when we are above ground."

The village of Meidum lies in a palm grove three kilometres west of the pyramid, and in a house at its edge we found the man Abu Zahir had described to me only as a trusted elder of the district: Sheikh Abd al-Aziz, in his mid-seventies, who received us with the unhurried courtesy of a man accustomed to unusual visitors at unusual hours. He offered tea, a corner of his reception room with a small fountain at one end, and the kind of attentive silence that I have occasionally encountered in very old and very settled people and which I have always found both restful and slightly unnerving.

Abu Zahir sat beside him and looked at me steadily across the room.

"There is something I want you to witness," he said. "You will not be required to accept its premises. I present it because the information it will contain is accurate, and I cannot explain

the source of that accuracy by conventional means without disclosing things that are not mine to disclose."

I said I would observe with an open mind. Abu Zahir went to a door at the back of the room, spoke quietly, and returned. A few moments later, a young woman entered.

She was Abu Zahir's sister by every evidence of face and bearing—the same quality of composed, measuring attention, the same very dark eyes, the same precision in the way she moved. She was perhaps thirty, dressed in a dark navy coat and headscarf, and she carried a small wooden box with the ease of someone carrying something familiar. She sat across the low table from us, set the box down, and looked at me once—a quick, assessing look that reminded me precisely of her brother—and then opened the box.

Inside were several small bottles, a reed pen, a square of cotton cloth, and a small brass brazier. I recognised, with a slight adjustment of expectations, what she was preparing: a *darb al-mandal*—a form of contemplative divination attested in Islamic mystical practice for at least seven centuries, in which the practitioner draws a figure on the upturned palm, pours ink, burns incense, and focuses the subject's attention until visions are reported. I had read about the practice in accounts of Sufi occult literature. I had not previously seen it performed, and I cannot claim with honesty that I knew what to expect.

Sheikh Abd al-Aziz drank his tea and watched with the look of a man who has seen this before.

Abu Zahir spoke a brief invocation—I caught *bismillah* and a phrase I recognised as from the Fatiha—and lit the brazier. A dark resin burned in it: something between myrrh and oud, dense and very aromatic, immediately perceptible as a physical weight in the warm room. The young woman—whose name, I learned later, was Fatima—extended her left hand, palm upward, across the table. Her brother drew a figure in ink on the palm: a grid divided into nine squares, a numeral in each, and then placed a single drop of ink at the center. Fatima fixed her gaze on the drop and became very still.

What she then described, in a quiet and entirely steady voice, I am going to set down without interpretation, because I have not arrived at one that satisfies me.

She described the pyramid's interior: the entrance passage, the horizontal section, the shaft, the eastern corner of the King's Chamber. She described the crevice in the wall with an accuracy that was not consistent with informed guessing—she gave the height of the crack from the chamber floor, the approximate depth of the cavity, the composition of the stone on either side. Then she said: "The ring is gone. It is no longer there. A hand took it."

"Seek it," said Abu Zahir, in a low voice, and added more resin to the fire.

Fatima was silent for a moment, still staring at the ink. Then: "I see a pharaoh on a throne. He draws a ring from his finger and gives it to a man standing behind the throne—a man with an expression I do not like. The person before the throne is

led away. This is the meaning of the ring: it is a sign of death passed from the king's hand." She paused. "I see a very long line of the dead, all those to whom it was passed over many centuries. They are going towards a tent in the desert. They go to call someone to join them."

Her voice had acquired a quality I found difficult to characterize—not trance-like, exactly, but absorbed in a way that ordinary speech is not. She spoke Arabic with the accent of the old city that I associated with Abu Zahir himself.

"Who holds the ring now?" asked Abu Zahir.

Fatima turned the ink-marked palm slightly, as though adjusting her angle of view. "A European man," she said. "He is very pleased with himself. He will not hold it long."

The incense smoke was by that point quite thick in the room and I found breathing normally required conscious effort. I excused myself as quietly as I could and went outside into the palm grove.

The night air was cool and smelled of water and old trees. I stood in it for some minutes, thinking about what I had witnessed and what I did or did not understand about it. A European man, pleased with himself, who had reached into the cavity in the eastern corner of the King's Chamber and taken the ring of Sneferu. A man who would not hold it long.

Abu Zahir joined me presently and I looked at him.

"Marsh," I said.

"I believe so, yes."

He told me, walking back across the desert towards the vehicles, what he knew. Marsh had been making inquiries in the area for several weeks, through a local intermediary: Ahmed Abdalla, a retired site worker who had been part of the original Meidum excavation workforce and who had known about the ring. Marsh had commissioned Ahmed Abdalla to enter the pyramid and retrieve it. Ahmed Abdalla had entered. Ahmed Abdalla had been found dead on the sand the following morning.

"And then Marsh went in himself," I said.

"That is my belief. He did not know, or did not draw the correct conclusion from, what had happened to Ahmed Abdalla."

I thought about Marsh on the rooftop terrace: the sideways glance at the Norwegian couple, the confidential undertone, the slightly excessive satisfaction of a man who considers himself, in this particular race, ahead. I thought about the ring in the eastern corner of the King's Chamber of the Pyramid of Meidum and the four and a half thousand years it had spent there in the dark, and about the Set-symbol that Abu Zahir had sent me that evening, and which I had begun, walking across the desert at two in the morning, to understand.

"The configuration of the Set-symbol you sent me," I said. "The specific arrangement—the Set-animal in that form with the additional cartouche—it's a marker. A warning marker. The ancient Egyptians used it to indicate a cache that was under serpent guard. A sacred hiding place protected by a living viper."

"Yes," said Abu Zahir. "A warning preserved for four and a half thousand years on the face of the ring and on the stone

above the cavity. Preserved against every hand that might have taken it—until tonight."

We found the camp as I had left it: Hassan's gear, Hassan's absence. We found the Land Rover and, parked twenty metres from it, a hired car with Luxor plates that I recognised as the kind that small operators in the area kept for foreign visitors who needed to reach sites off the main road.

The tent was set up in a shallow depression between two dunes, perhaps a hundred and fifty metres from the pyramid's eastern face. It was small, well-equipped, and still had a camp light burning inside it.

Marsh was on the camp bed, on his back, in the attitude of someone who had lain down for a moment and been surprised by something faster than rest. His face was very pale. His right hand was heavily swollen, the swelling extending up the forearm to the elbow, the skin of the hand discoloured in the way I had seen once before in a colleague who had been bitten by a viper in the Sinai and had survived only because a hospital had been forty minutes away. On the third finger of the swollen right hand was a ring of gold, the green *cartouche* of Sneferu clearly visible in the lamplight.

He had been dead, by the temperature of the tent and the condition of the body, for at least two hours.

The crevice in the King's Chamber of the Pyramid of Meidum was a viper's nest. Ahmed Abdalla had reached into it and been bitten. Marsh had reached into it and been bitten. I had been

saved from the same end by the failure of a headlamp battery that I had believed to be fully charged.

Abu Zahir stood beside me for a long moment without speaking. Then he took from his jacket pocket a pair of thin latex gloves—which told me he had anticipated at least the possibility of this outcome—and carefully removed the ring from Marsh's finger. He examined it for a moment in the lamplight, then wrapped it in a square of cotton cloth and placed it in his pocket.

"This belongs to the Egyptian state," he said. "I will ensure it reaches the appropriate people through appropriate means. As for your colleague—I will make one call when we are within signal range. The cause of death is not in dispute and the legal circumstances are straightforward. A British national, found dead of snakebite near an archaeological site. It is, regrettably, not unprecedented."

I looked at Theo Marsh's face—the face of a man who had been good at his work and had been slightly too confident about how much that goodness would protect him—and did not say anything. There was nothing useful to say.

We went out into the cold desert night. Abu Zahir had his own vehicle and his own route back to Cairo, and we parted in the dark by the foot of the pyramid without ceremony. I drove north alone in the small hours, with no company but the radio and the long straight road.

Hassan al-Sughra sent me a message two days later—only that he had been frightened and was sorry. I did not hold it against

him. He had seen the funeral procession at Rikka and had drawn, much earlier than I, the correct conclusion about what was in that crevice, and he had been right to be frightened. He was, as I have said, a man of sound judgment.

I thought about Theo Marsh a great deal in the weeks that followed. He had been thirty-six years old, in Cairo for eight months, and by his colleagues' account had been very promising. He had been, in other words, genuinely good at what we both did. The difference between his outcome and mine was not skill or judgment or caution or knowledge. It was the battery level of a headlamp that I had believed to be adequately charged.

I did not find this thought particularly comforting, but it had the advantage of being true, and I have found that true thoughts, however uncomfortable, tend to be more useful than comfortable ones. I have kept my equipment meticulously charged ever since.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LADY OF THE LATTICE

The house in the Darb el-Ahmar was dark, smelled of old stone and the particular species of dust that accumulates only in long-abandoned rooms, and had been empty for the better part of a decade, all of which I found encouraging. I moved through it with my phone's flashlight cutting a narrow path through the dimness, noting the ceiling heights, the condition of the plaster, and the solidity of the floors, making the calculations one makes when assessing whether a space will serve as secure temporary storage for objects too significant to leave in standard facilities and too problematic to declare at a bonded warehouse. The provenance of the keys I was holding was somewhat uncertain—the man who had given them to me had represented himself as the authorised agent of a lessee who was himself representing a party whose identity had not been established to my satisfaction—but in this particular quarter of Cairo the possession of keys has traditionally been treated as a sufficient title to use a place, and I did not interrogate the principle more closely than convenience required.

My inspection of the lower and middle floors had been completed satisfactorily. I was passing through the upper room when I paused at the *mushrabiyyeh* window: one of those projecting oriel screens of turned wooden lattice that appear in all the old Islamic Quarter houses, a deep alcove from which one can look down into the lane while remaining substantially concealed from

below. I found the catch on one of the inner panels, swung it open, and looked out.

The lane below was narrow and silver-pale in the light from the street lamp at its far end. Empty. To my right, no more than three metres across the gap of the lane, was the equivalent window in the face of the adjacent house. The lattice panel on that side stood ajar. Within, just visible in the soft light of a lamp placed somewhere further back in the room, a woman was seated sideways at the ledge, looking out at the night with the particular expression of someone who has been doing this for some considerable time and has not found it adequate.

Her arm rested on the sill. On it, above the elbow, was a bangle.

The bangle was gold, set with lapis-lazuli inlay in the horizontal-register design characteristic of the Ramesside period—the Nineteenth Dynasty, broadly speaking, give or take a century on either side. Even at this distance, even in the indirect light, the quality of the work was immediately apparent. So was the fact that its wearer had no idea whatsoever of its significance. She wore it as one wears any piece of family jewelry: with the unthinking ease of the habitual, the way one wears something beautiful that was given to you long enough ago that you have stopped seeing it.

I am not a romantic man in the usual sense, or at least not one who acts on romantic impulse without professional justification. In this instance professional justification arrived immediately and in overwhelming quantity. A Ramesside

gold-and-lapis armlet, worn casually in the upper story of a private house in the Darb el-Ahmar by a woman who was evidently being kept there against her better judgment, was not a thing I was constitutionally capable of ignoring.

I kept this reaction, with effort, from my expression.

She had become aware of me—perhaps had been aware for some time—and we observed each other across the narrow silver gap of the lane in the manner of two people who understand that the observation is mutual and have not yet decided what to do about it. Then she looked away again, with the elaborate naturalness of someone who has performed that gesture in a mirror until it feels spontaneous.

"The lane seems quiet at this hour," I said in Arabic, at a volume that would not carry beyond our two windows.

A moment of stillness. Then a young woman's voice, composed and slightly amused: "It is always quiet. I have had considerable time to observe it."

"You are not from Cairo originally." Her Arabic had the intonation of somewhere further south.

"No. And you are British."

"Guilty. I am here on business." I paused. "I am given to understand the trapdoor to the roof of this house opens from below."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she lowered her voice. "Tomorrow night. Nine o'clock. If you open it—" She heard something in the room behind her and the lattice closed.

From the sill where it had fallen, I retrieved a folded piece of paper: a page from a small notebook, with a single line in neat Arabic: *Tomorrow. Nine. Thank you.*

I closed my lattice, returned to the lower floor, and stood for a while with the note and the phone-light and the silence of the empty house. The bangle of lapis-lazuli floated in my memory with the persistence of genuinely significant things.

The following morning I met Joseph Petraki at a café near the Bab Zuwayla, in the shadow of the great gate with its pair of Ottoman minarets, and we had the kind of conversation that achieves very little directly but communicates a considerable amount through its awkwardnesses.

Petraki had handled the logistics of my Alexandria shipments for three years: the customs documentation, the warehousing, the careful paperwork that transformed objects of contested legal status into items in transit towards lawful private ownership. He was Egyptian-Greek by descent, which in Cairo tends to produce either academics or fixers, and Petraki had made his choice firmly. He was well-dressed in the manner of someone who has recently acquired the resources to dress well and has not yet developed the judgment that goes with it, and he smiled with a regularity that I had always found more concerning than the absence of smiling.

I told him I had found a private storage space and would redirect the current shipment—ten cases from Alexandria, currently with his agent—to my new address in the Darb el-Ahmar.

His smile acquired, almost imperceptibly, a slightly deliberate quality. "It might be more practical," he said, with the particular care of a man choosing words, "to have the goods held at my warehouse for now. Until the new place is properly ready."

"It is ready," I said.

"Of course, of course. Only—the address is somewhat irregular for a delivery vehicle."

"The cases can be brought by hand from the street. It is not a difficulty."

He agreed, too quickly, and was careful to ask for the address twice in a way intended to seem casual. The second time he wrote it down and folded the paper into his jacket pocket with a deliberateness he was trying to make look unconscious. I watched him walk away down the lane and thought, returning to the Gamaleya, that there was something in his manner that I had not seen in it before and did not like. I should have acted on this observation. I did not.

At nine the following evening the trapdoor above me creaked and a figure descended the ladder with the tentative precision of someone who has mentally rehearsed an action many times but is performing it physically for the first time.

Bahija was wearing a floral maxi dress with an emphatic pattern of large roses, apparently designed for a garden party, over which she had layered a light jacket several sizes too large that belonged to a different era. On her head was a broad straw hat with a trailing gauze veil in olive green—a variety of sun

hat that might have been fashionable somewhere in approximately the mid-nineties—found, I guessed, in the back of a wardrobe. She wore platform sandals and carried a tote bag bearing the logo of a Cairo university. The general effect was of someone who had assembled a “European woman in Cairo” costume from items found in an unfamiliar house, without access to a mirror, in poor light, under time pressure.

She removed the hat as she reached the bottom of the ladder and looked up at me with an expression of practised composure that broke immediately into a real and entirely unguarded smile.

“Will I pass?” she asked, in English.

“As what, precisely?”

“As someone who is allowed to be in the street.”

“With minor caveats,” I said. “Let us say you will pass as a foreign tourist who has had a difficult few weeks.”

She laughed—a quick, genuine laugh, without any management in it—and I thought that she had been short of reasons to laugh for some time. Her name was Bahija, she had been in the house for eight weeks, the man who had brought her there was called Yusuf and she despised him, and what she wanted, more than anything, was to see the Khan el-Khalili at night and the large hotels along the Nile and the lights on the Corniche. These are, it occurred to me, not unreasonable things to want.

We went north through the Darb el-Ahmar and she was, from the first block, excellent company. She had two months of involuntary attentiveness behind her and it showed: she wanted to know the history of every mosque we passed, how old, built by

whom, for what purpose. She stopped at a corner cart for ta'amiyya and ate it while walking with the absorption of someone eating something they have been thinking about for a long time. She wanted to look in every shop window still open on the al-Muizz; she wanted to hear me describe the history of the Bab al-Futuh gate; she had a great many questions about the Fatimid caliphate that demonstrated she had been doing her reading.

We reached the northern edge of the Khan el-Khalili, where even at this hour the tourist trade maintains a determined presence and the silver and copper shops send their lamplight out into the lanes, when she stopped.

"Hanna," she said. Quietly and without any other expression.

I looked without appearing to. Across the street and somewhat ahead of us, a heavysset man in dark clothing was standing beside a car with the particular stillness of someone who is looking at something and has been looking at it for longer than he wanted. A second man was beside him, his face turned our way.

"Who is Hanna?" I said.

"He works for Sheikh Ismail." She kept her voice level with visible effort. "If he has seen us, they have already been called. We need to go back."

We turned south the way we had come, at a pace that I kept even and deliberate. The lane beside the Mosque of Mu'ayyad was our route home. I noticed, as we turned into it, that the doorways on both sides were occupied in the specific way that doorways are occupied by people waiting rather than passing, and

I made two calculations in very quick succession: Bahija's safety, and mine.

"The keys are in my right jacket pocket," I said. "Run."

She had her hand in my pocket before I finished the sentence. Then she was gone, and I turned.

Five men were detaching themselves from the shadows along the mosque wall. They moved in silence, which is always more unsettling than noise, and with the coordinated efficiency of people who had done this kind of thing before and had an agreed plan. I had my hand on the Beretta at my hip and had it free of the holster and was computing options when someone seized me from behind with a speed and anatomical precision that I have rarely encountered, and that instantly and completely removed all of them.

My right arm went up between my shoulder blades in a grip that made resistance not just ineffective but structurally contraindicated. My pistol was taken from my left hand. The five men from the shadows stopped and waited.

A door in the face of the mosque opened and a man came out.

He was very tall, very lean, and very old, and he moved with the rapid purpose of someone who has been keeping a specific fury under control for weeks and has at last reached the context in which it may be expressed. He had a hawk's face—hooked nose, eyes burning with a contained and entirely directed outrage, jaw set with the specific determination of a man who has thought clearly about what he is about to do and has decided to do it—and in his right hand he carried a curved scimitar of antique provenance and

demonstrable structural integrity, raised to a height and angle that left no ambiguity about its intended application.

I have experienced frightening moments in my professional life. This was the first in which I achieved a genuine full-body understanding of what the phrase means. My tongue adhered to my palate. My heart expressed a brief and forceful opinion. I had time to observe, with a clarity that I have since identified as the specific effect of acute mortal fear on the human perceptual system, the precise quality of the light on the blade as it began its descent towards my neck.

An ebony cane, inserted between the scimitar's arc and my person with the precision of a calculation completed in advance, deflected the blade. The impact rang against the stone of the wall. A slim ivory hand closed on the old man's wrist. A figure in black and white stepped between us with the measured speed of someone who has arrived at this moment without being surprised by it.

Ibrahim Abu Zahir turned to face my would-be executioner with a quality of authority that I have tried, over the months of our acquaintance, to describe to myself accurately and have not entirely succeeded. It was not the authority of rank or of physical force, though it implied both. It was closer to the authority of someone who has been right so many times, in matters of comparable weight, that their judgment has acquired the quality of a completed argument. The old man's fury met it and, gradually, was contained.

"This matter has been entrusted to me," said Abu Zahir.

"Stand back."

The old man—teeth audibly clenched, one arm rigid at his side, the other still holding the scimitar at a frustrated angle—stepped back. The grip on my right arm was released.

Abu Zahir turned to me and said, in English, with the particular courtesy he brings to the delivery of difficult information: "I would advise you to come with me. There is, in addition to this situation, a matter of a search warrant issued this evening for premises in the Darb el-Ahmar on the basis of an allegation of drug trafficking."

The next few minutes are hazy in my recollection. I believe the old man—who turned out to be Sheikh Ismail, of whom I would hear considerably more before the night was over—was, after further exchanges with Abu Zahir, prevailed upon to withdraw, though I have the impression that it required most of Abu Zahir's considerable reserves of patience to achieve it. I was walking south along the Darb el-Ahmar in the company of an imam who moved like a man who had all the time in the world and none of it to waste, and I was thinking very rapidly about Petraki and the address he had written down twice.

The house was unlocked when we reached it—Bahija had made it back. The ten cases from Alexandria were stacked in the ground floor room as they had been since delivery. Abu Zahir took a small torch from his jacket and examined the label on the nearest case. "Ahmed al-Tawwab," he said. "The name under which the house was leased?"

"A name I used for the tenancy," I said. "The cases are mine."

"Then you will not object to opening one."

We opened the third case. Under the layer of small Osiris statuettes and faience beads I had arranged to purchase through an Alexandrian dealer were a number of vacuum-sealed packages of a substance I did not need to open to identify. A familiar and extremely unwelcome smell reached us from the disturbed packing.

The silence that followed was one of the longer silences of my professional life.

"The anonymous information I received," said Abu Zahir, after a moment, "named this address and the consignee. I am disposed, given what I know of you, to believe this is not your doing. I would, however, be grateful for whatever explanation you have."

I told him about Petraki. I told him about the address written down twice, the excessive agreeableness, the slight quality of calculation in everything he had said that morning. Abu Zahir listened with his characteristic undivided attention. Before I had finished, a sound from behind the stack of cases made us both turn.

Bahija came out from behind the cases in her rose-patterned dress and assessed the situation with the quick, precise attention of someone who has been listening carefully to everything and has a good working hypothesis.

"I will wait outside," said Abu Zahir, and stepped into the lane, which was one of the more tactful things I have seen a man do.

She told me her story in the spare and uncomplaining way of someone who has had time to organize it. She was the ward of Sheikh Ismail—an elderly merchant of the old school, traditional, very protective, and possessed of a temper that she described with a mixture of affection and resignation. She had been in his Cairo household for two years. Yusuf had been a business contact of Ismail's who had convinced her, during one of Ismail's absences, that a particular marriage was being arranged for her without her consent, and that she ought to leave before it was finalized. The choice had not been entirely involuntary on her part, she said, with the candor of someone who has had eight weeks to think about a decision. She had since revised her assessment of both the marriage and Yusuf's motives considerably.

"The bangle," I said. "Where did it come from?"

She looked at it on her arm. "My mother's. She gave it to me before she died. It has always been in the family." She paused. "Why?"

"No particular reason," I said, which was the most direct untruth I had told in several days.

"Yusuf is in the house now," she said. "He was in his room destroying papers when I left. Ali—the doorman, who is loyal to me—told me."

I looked at the roof trap. "Is the access on his side still open from below?"

"It was when I came across."

I left her with water and instructions not to open the street door, and I climbed the ladder.

The roof was flat, pale, warm underfoot with the day's stored heat, and connected by an unbroken span to the roof of the adjacent house. The trap on that side was not fastened. I descended in darkness, entered an attic that smelled unmistakably of cannabis resin at commercial density, and moved carefully down to the first floor.

A heavy curtain hung in the doorway of the lit room. I drew it aside and stepped in.

The man at the desk in the recess—his back to the door, bent over a document shredder through which he was feeding papers with the focused urgency of someone destroying things that should have been destroyed some time ago—rose and turned with the speed of a person who has been listening for footsteps and has been willing himself not to hear them.

I looked at the face of Yusuf of the Darb el-Ahmar.

I looked at the face of Joseph Petraki.

He held my gaze for approximately three seconds while performing a rapid calculation whose variables were visible in his expression: the shredder, the document in his hand, the jacket pocket where my Beretta was not, having been confiscated in the lane. Then composure gave way to something considerably less controlled.

"Greaves," he said. "I can explain."

"You can," I said. "You can explain it in writing. Sit down."

I dictated. He wrote, with a hand whose slight tremor gave the lines an appropriately agitated quality: a full account of the hashish that had been routinely added to my cases, the decision to use the final Alexandria consignment to create a drugs charge at my address when I became an inconvenience, and the anonymous communication to Abu Zahir that had set the warrant in motion. He signed it. I folded it and put it in my inside pocket.

"You will present yourself to the appropriate authorities tomorrow morning," I said. "You will ensure that my name appears in no context except that of an innocent leaseholder deceived about the character of his agent. If you do this correctly, I will not convey your name and current address to Sheikh Ismail."

At the name of Sheikh Ismail, the colour of Joseph Petraki's face changed in a way that was, I admit, extremely satisfying to observe. Genuine fear, when it arrives, looks quite different from its lesser relatives, and sits on a face in a way that is unmistakable.

"He is in Cairo?" said Petraki.

"He has been in Cairo for some days," I said. "Searching. You have until tomorrow morning."

I left him there and went back across the roof.

The following evening, as I sat on the terrace of a Garden City hotel attempting to reconstruct, from a collection of receipts and self-issued invoices, any commercial record of my

tenure as a Darb el-Ahmar leaseholder that did not incriminate me in something, Abu Zahir arrived with his usual unhurried precision and accepted the chair across the table.

"Petraki," he said, after a moment's silence in which he appeared to be organizing his thoughts into their most useful sequence, "has earned the reward."

I put down my pen.

"He presented himself to the proper authorities this morning and made a number of disclosures about his activities. In the course of this process, he also provided information about the location of a certain person who had been sought in this district for some weeks. A property in Shubra where that person was residing." Abu Zahir looked at me with his very still, very dark eyes. "The person has been located and returned to the household of Sheikh Ismail. The Sheikh's gratitude has been expressed in several practical forms."

I sat for a moment with this. I had told Petraki, the previous night, exactly where Bahija was hidden. I had told him this in the process of ensuring she was safely concealed while the legal situation was resolved, and I had done so approximately ten hours before he needed a useful piece of information to offer the authorities in exchange for leniency. I thought about the specific expression on his face when I first mentioned Sheikh Ismail's name—the expression I had read as fear—and I revised my understanding of it. It had been calculation. He had been identifying the asset available to him and determining its value

against his immediate requirements, and I had handed it to him across a desk.

I had been outmaneuvered by Joseph Petraki. I found this very difficult to accept and have not, entirely, managed it.

"And the bangle," I said, because there was nothing useful left to say about the rest of it.

"An extraordinary piece." Abu Zahir reached inside his *gibbeh* and placed on the table between us a gold and lapis-lazuli armlet of the Ramesside period, the lamp on the terrace bringing out the deep Egyptian blue of the inlay with an almost offensive clarity. "Sheikh Ismail, in his gratitude, offered it as a gift. He understood, I think, that he was returning it to a more appropriate custody than it had recently enjoyed." He looked at it on the table with a quiet satisfaction that I found, under the circumstances, extremely difficult to share. "I intend it for my sister. She was asking about Pharaonic jewelry some time ago and I have been waiting for an appropriate occasion."

He placed the armlet back inside his robe, inclined his head in the grave courtesy that ends all our conversations, and rose from the chair.

"Good evening, Mr. Greaves," he said.

I watched him cross the terrace and disappear into the hotel lobby. Then I looked at the receipts in front of me, which had not become any more useful in the interval, and at the view of the Nile from the terrace rail, and at the city beyond it, which was doing what it always does at night—shining, moving, layered,

ancient, going about its business with a comprehensive indifference to any individual's plans.

The bangle of lapis-lazuli had cost me a search warrant, a near-decapitation, the effective destruction of one commercial arrangement and the severe complication of another, and approximately four days of concentrated anxiety. From first sight to last, it had never been within reach.

I ordered a drink and reflected that the city had been making this particular point to people like me for approximately five thousand years, and had not yet found any reason to stop.

CHAPTER FOUR

OMAR OF ISFAHAN

The heritage suite at the Nile Panorama Hotel had been unoccupied for the first three days of my stay, which had led M. Sarkis—the French-Lebanese manager who moved through the hotel's daily affairs with the perpetual low-level anxiety of a man anticipating a catastrophe he cannot quite specify—to hope it would remain empty through the week of the hotel's annual charity masquerade. When it was suddenly taken, two days before the party, by a guest requiring specific arrangements for privacy and the daily attendance of two personal staff, his anxiety became perceptibly less low-level.

"The daughter of the Director of the Fayum governorate," Sir Bertram Wycliffe informed me, with the quiet satisfaction of someone who has done his research. We were on the pool terrace on the garden side of the hotel, where the bougainvillea bloomed over the old stone balustrade and the Nile was visible between the palms in the late afternoon. Sir Bertram had served his last posting at the British Embassy in Cairo as cultural attaché and had retired to a life of organized sightseeing in a city he had come to know very well. His wife Daphne possessed a rope of pearls she wore every evening, a talent for making friends in hotels, and a Queen of Sheba costume she had been preparing for the masquerade for six weeks. "Apparently the family possesses Mamluk-period jewelry of considerable significance. Pieces that

are known among people who know about such things." He glanced at me. "Your sort of people, I imagine."

I had been staying as Sir Bertram's guest for the week. My own reason for being there was a consignment of objects from a Gamaleya dealer I was awaiting documentation on; Pendleton & Morne are not a patient firm. The masquerade was a side-effect that I had been looking forward to rather more than professional dignity permits me to admit.

"I should not," I said, "like to see those pieces at a summer party in 2025."

Sir Bertram looked at me. "Why not?"

"Because Omar of Isfahan will be here," said a voice, from the direction of the jasmine hedge.

We both turned. Ibrahim Abu Zahir emerged from the thick greenery along the garden path and seated himself in the third chair at our table as though he had been expected, which by this point in our acquaintance he usually had been. Sir Bertram, with the practised courtesy of a diplomat accustomed to unusual people appearing in the company of his acquaintances, stayed for three minutes of pleasantries and then excused himself. Abu Zahir watched him go, and turned to me.

Omar Ali Khan, he said, was known in the relevant circles by that name and known more broadly, among those whose possessions represented serious temptation, as the Father of Thieves. He had a résumé of particular distinction. His documented achievements included the theft of a pair of blue diamonds from a Hyderabad collection, the impersonation of a senior Egyptian customs

official for eleven days in 2019, and—here Abu Zahir paused with the deliberateness of a man who knows his pause will be effective—the original theft of the *yashmak* of Sayyida Nafisa from her shrine, which piece had subsequently been recovered through means he did not specify.

I said nothing about my own role in that recovery.

“He is in Cairo,” said Abu Zahir. “He will be at the masquerade tomorrow night. I am effectively certain of it.” He looked at me with his characteristic stillness. “The Director’s daughter has pieces that are known throughout the trade. She wore them at a function in Luxor six months ago and I have reliable information she has brought them with her.” He paused. “I have been entrusted with the protection of those pieces. I am asking you to take responsibility for the other guests.”

“My friend,” I said, “I am a cultural consultant, not a detective. I am not qualified to prevent a theft by the Father of Thieves.”

“I do not ask you to prevent it,” said Abu Zahir calmly. “I ask you to warn the guests individually, so that each takes sensible precautions. And to keep your eyes open tomorrow evening.” He looked at me steadily. “You have met Omar of Isfahan before without knowing it. You may do so again. An additional pair of observant eyes is not nothing.”

He rose, inclined his head, and walked back into the jasmine hedge as cleanly as he had emerged from it.

The effect of my news on Daphne Wycliffe was, as it always is when one mentions the specific vulnerability of a specific

piece of jewelry, the exact opposite of my intention. She immediately resolved to wear the pearls, on the grounds that her Queen of Sheba costume had been designed around them and would be inexplicably compromised by substituting costume jewelry. Sir Bertram attempted to reason with her and failed in the cheerful way he had been failing on important subjects for thirty years.

The most interesting reception was provided by Ostermann, whom I found at the hotel bar in the early evening. He was a Gujarati diamond merchant based in Antwerp, partner in a firm of respectable standing, and he was carrying a small parcel of rough stones to auction in Amsterdam, which was the reason he was in transit in Cairo in July, the city being at its most brutally hot and most of its sensible residents having migrated temporarily to the coast. He had been lingering a week beyond his planned departure because, he said, he was fond of Cairo in summer, which has a specific quality of concentrated heat that he found conducive to a certain kind of thinking.

He was a compact man of fifty with gold-rimmed spectacles, two gold rings on his right hand, and the specific quality of watchful attention that I associate with the diamond trade, which is fundamentally built on not being deceived. At the name of Omar Ali Khan, his expression underwent the particular change that occurs when a name is raised that one has been hoping not to hear.

"Good God," he said. "Is that name known here?"

"It is known to me. I understand he took the blue stones from a Hyderabad collection two years ago."

"You are correctly informed," said Ostermann, "and it was my firm that originally brokered that sale. I am therefore very well acquainted with the details of their subsequent disappearance." He glanced at the breast pocket in which, presumably, his current stones reposed. "You have made me extremely uncomfortable, Mr. Greaves."

"You might consider putting the stones in the manager's safe."

"I distrust all safes but my own," he said, with the stubborn conviction of someone who knows this policy is irrational and has decided to maintain it anyway. "I prefer to carry valuables on my person."

Inspector Maddox was at the far end of the bar, a square-shouldered Scotsman of forty-five who had been on his way back to London from a consultation in Dubai and had been persuaded by M. Sarkis to break his journey for the week of the masquerade. He was attached to an international art crime unit and brought to any room he occupied the quiet professional attention of someone who looks at things without appearing to look. He greeted Ostermann with pleasant neutrality.

"I know your firm," he said. "I'd understood your partner had already passed through Amsterdam."

"He arrived last week," said Ostermann. "I am, as ever, the straggler. I now sincerely wish I were elsewhere."

"Oh, don't be alarmed," said Maddox, with the cheering confidence of a man who is about to be badly wrong about something. "There are enough of us keeping an eye on things."

Ostermann ordered another drink and remained palpably unconvinced.

Earlier in the evening, in the course of our bar conversation, I had shown Ostermann my Hatshepsut scarab ring—a genuine Eighteenth Dynasty piece, the cartouche on the flat face and the beetle uppermost in normal wear, set in a revolving bezel—and asked his opinion of its date. He had examined it with the professional interest of a man who handles antique settings, turned the bezel to read the cartouche, and handed it back with a date that was accurate to within a century. I had thought nothing of this at the time.

The following evening, the garden of the Nile Panorama Hotel presented the specific spectacle that Cairo's event planners produce when given a generous budget and a mandate to be atmospheric. Lights had been wound through the bougainvillea and the palms; the fountain had been converted, by means I did not investigate, into something that resembled liquid copper in the lamplight. The terraces held perhaps a hundred and fifty guests in costumes that linked the ages with the cheerful anachronism of all costume parties: a Pharaoh's queen danced with a Regency officer; a figure in Crusader armor attempted conversation with the Queen of Sheba, who was Daphne Wycliffe, wearing her rope of pearls above a gilded collar.

I wore my ordinary dinner jacket, for which I remain constitutionally unwilling to apologize. Inspector Maddox was similarly attired, and we had several productive conversations during the first two hours. He struck me as a man who takes in a

room without appearing to examine it, which is the most useful kind.

Ostermann had come as Al-Mokanna, the Veiled Prophet of Khorasan—a figure from a Thomas Moore poem who wore a silver face-veil on the grounds that his countenance would overwhelm the perceptions of ordinary mortals. The costume, which involved elaborate dark robes and a full-face covering of silver gauze beneath a large turban, concealed him entirely except for the glint of his spectacles through the veil. He was an enthusiastic conversationalist throughout the evening, moving from group to group with a sociability I had not previously associated with him.

For Abu Zahir I looked in vain among the crowd. He had, as usual, arranged to be present on his own terms.

At a certain point in the evening I withdrew from the ballroom into the garden and found myself at the quiet corner where the heritage suite faces the hotel grounds. It is the most beautiful spot in that beautiful garden: a *mushrabiyyeh* window projects over the path, overhung with bougainvillea, and in front of it a tall palm throws its shadow in the lamplight with the precision of a sundial.

As I stood there, the central panels of the window opened, and a woman appeared.

She was dressed in white, elaborately draped, a white *yashmak* below a headdress embroidered in gold. Her arms and fingers were laden with jewelry—and even in this light, even at this distance, the quality of what she wore was apparent: the

deep green of large emeralds in heavy gold settings, pieces of a magnificence and apparent antiquity that belonged, unambiguously, in a museum cabinet. She stood at the window for less than a minute, looking out into the garden with an expression I could not read, and then the window closed and she was gone.

I recovered myself and went back to the ballroom.

On the very threshold I encountered Ostermann. Or rather: the figure in the Veiled Prophet costume seized my arm, and when I turned I saw the spectacles glinting through the silver gauze and heard a voice that was Ostermann's and was, at the same time, fractionally not Ostermann's.

"Mr. Greaves," he said urgently. "My stones. The entire parcel is gone."

"What?"

"The case is in my pocket. There is nothing in it."

Daphne Wycliffe, who had seen me enter, appeared at this moment. The effect upon the Veiled Prophet was remarkable. He stared at her rope of pearls with an intensity entirely disproportionate to a man who had just reported his own loss, then extended one gloved hand.

"Permit me to look at those for one moment," he said.

Daphne Wycliffe—whose trust in official-seeming requests is a quality I have never fully understood—removed the pearls and placed them in his hands. He ran them through his fingers, held one pearl under the lamp for fifteen seconds, and extended the necklace on his open palm.

"These are not your pearls," he said, in a voice that had gone entirely flat. "This is a paste copy."

Daphne's face lost its colour by degrees, like a photograph left in the sun. Then Ostermann held out his own case—a slim leather wallet bearing the name of his firm in gold—and opened it. Among the protective folds of cloth where the rough stones should have been were six small irregular pieces of coal.

Mrs. Van Doorn, a Chicago collector I had warned at the first opportunity and who had also declined to take precautions, appeared from the dance floor at this moment and announced, in a carrying voice, that her diamond tiara was a fake.

Ostermann, who appeared to have temporarily lost his capacity for useful speech, pointed at my hand.

I looked at the scarab ring. I turned the bezel. The flat face was blank. No cartouche. The stone was not even genuine lapis-lazuli. It was a very competent copy of a ring that had not been worth copying; the original's value lay entirely in what was inscribed on its underside, which "Ostermann" had read in the bar that evening and had apparently needed no further time with.

Inspector Maddox had last been seen at ten o'clock and was not in the ballroom, the bar, or the terrace. His room was reached by M. Sarkis and a hotel official. They found him on the floor beside his bed, fully dressed and still wearing his hat, quite insensible. On the carpet beside him lay a cigar, two-thirds smoked.

"He doctored every cigar in the case," said M. Sarkis, in a voice that suggested he had already formed this hypothesis and had been hoping very much to be wrong about it.

The real Ostermann was found in his own wardrobe, bound with the belt of his dressing gown and gagged with the hotel's face flannel, dressed in a bathrobe and slippers, his wrists and ankles marked by the cord. He had been there since approximately half past seven, when he had been struck from behind upon returning from his bath. He had been in his wardrobe throughout the entire evening while his conversation, his dancing, his examination of other people's jewelry, and his excellent comic timing had been provided by someone else entirely.

"I have been robbed?" he said, when he had recovered the power of speech.

"Impersonated," I said, "for approximately five hours. Which in some ways is worse."

Abu Zahir stepped onto my balcony at half past midnight through the glass door I had left ajar, and stood for a moment looking at me with an expression that I identified, after a moment, as containing a degree of controlled amusement beneath the usual gravity.

"He will stay for the Director's daughter," he said. "Everything else this evening was opportunism. The pieces in the heritage suite are the reason he is here."

"After what he has already taken tonight," I said, "you believe he will push his luck further?"

"Covetousness of that order does not stop easily," said Abu Zahir. He moved to the glass door and looked out at the darkened garden. "What I need from you requires patience, good nerves, and the absence of any impulse to take direct action. Can you manage those requirements?"

"Describe what you need," I said.

He described it with the compact precision of a man who has already run through the sequence several times. There was an acacia tree on the far side of the garden path, opposite the heritage suite. I was to reach it from the garden's southern entrance, approaching from the opposite direction to the hotel's main wing so as to remain invisible from the lit building. From one of its lower branches I would have a clear sightline to four specific windows: the room of Inspector Maddox, still occupied by the insensible inspector; the room that had been used by the false Ostermann; the room of a Colonel Pemberton from Nairobi on the floor above the heritage suite; and the suite's own window.

"For what am I watching?"

"For a man to descend from above." He looked at the gold pocket watch I carry on its chain—my grandfather's, a habit I have never rationalized adequately. "When you see movement at one of those windows, cover and uncover the watch case towards this balcony: once for the first window, twice for the second, three times for the third, four times for the fourth."

"And then?"

"Remain concealed. If anyone leaves the suite by the window—do not interfere. Let them pass. That is the critical instruction: let them pass."

I was in the acacia tree within ten minutes, settled into the lower branches, the watch case open on my palm. The garden was quiet, the party concluded, the lights in the trees reduced to their minimum. Cairo's sky above the palms glowed its permanent amber from the city's light, and the moon—two days past full—added its own cooler contribution. The jasmine was very strong in the warm air.

I had been there perhaps eight minutes when a figure appeared on the balcony of the third window: Colonel Pemberton's room, directly above the heritage suite.

It moved with the deliberateness that distinguishes people engaged in purposeful activity from people doing everything else. From beneath the balcony rail it produced a length of knotted cord, lowered it to the *mushrabiyyeh* projection of the suite window below, and followed the cord down with the agility of someone who keeps themselves specifically fit for exactly this kind of movement.

I covered and uncovered the watch case three times in the direction of Abu Zahir's balcony.

The figure on the *mushrabiyyeh* projection worked at the window panels with a patience that was itself professionally impressive. In under two minutes a panel opened inward, and the figure slipped inside.

From the upper floors of the hotel's main wing, a thin figure descended on a climbing cord of its own: Abu Zahir, moving with the fluid competence of a man to whom vertical surfaces represent a navigational rather than an architectural challenge. He reached the garden, crossed the path in shadow, and went up the palm tree beside the *mushrabiyyeh* with a speed I had not previously associated with someone who wore his dignity as carefully as he wore his. He disappeared through the open panel.

From inside the suite: the brief, purposeful sound of a vigorous altercation.

Then the window opened fully, and a figure appeared in it. White robes, gold-embroidered, heavy with emerald jewelry. The figure gripped the ledge, looked down, saw me below, and said, in a voice that was slightly higher and slightly more urgent than the situation strictly required: "Oh, help me—in the name of Allah—catch me—"

I stepped forward, and the figure dropped from the window into my arms with a precision suggesting that this moment had been calculated in advance. I held, for approximately three seconds, a figure in white robes smelling of expensive perfume and weighted with what were, even by touch in the dark, clearly very significant pieces of jewelry. And then the figure was out of my arms and running, with a speed entirely inconsistent with the platform sandals I had felt briefly underfoot, towards the garden's southern gate.

From somewhere inside the suite, Abu Zahir's voice: "See that she does not leave by the window, Greaves Pasha!"

I looked at the gate through which the white-robed figure had just disappeared. I looked back at the window. I went up the palm tree.

The suite's interior was large, furnished in the pan-Islamic style that luxury hotels develop for guests who want both comfort and atmosphere, and it was in moderate disorder. A carved cabinet had been overturned. On the floor of the outer room lay one of the hotel's female staff—she had been part of the suite's household for the week—insensible, breathing, an embroidered cushion placed near her head with a consideration that suggested the person who had incapacitated her had not been entirely without scruples about it.

Abu Zahir stood in the center of the room. He was looking at me with an expression I had not seen on his face before: not the contained amusement, not the grave authority, but the more direct expression of a man revising a plan in real time while keeping the revision from showing.

"The figure who left by the window," he said.

"She was falling," I said.

"He was descending," said Abu Zahir.

A silence of considerable weight settled over the room.

"Omar of Isfahan," said Abu Zahir, "can impersonate anyone. He has impersonated a blind mendicant, a senior customs official, and Mr. Ostermann for the better part of five hours. He was wearing my sister's robes." He looked at the overturned cabinet and the attendant on the floor and then looked at me again. "My sister left this suite at sunset, taking her jewels with her.

This attendant wore her clothes as a decoy. Omar of Isfahan came for the jewels, encountered a decoy, and left by the window in the robes he had found."

I said nothing. There was nothing useful to say.

"The instruction I gave you," said Abu Zahir, "was to let any figure who left by the window pass without interference."

"You said not to interfere," I said.

"I did not say to catch her."

Another silence. Abu Zahir looked at me for a long moment, and then the severe expression underwent one of its characteristic brief revisions in the direction of something softer. "No man is infallible," he said. "And wiser men than either of us have been made to look foolish by Omar Ali Khan. He is gone with nothing. Come."

The bolted door had been receiving vigorous attention from the other side for some minutes. I opened it. Inspector Maddox stood at the head of the corridor, pale and not yet entirely focused, hat still on his head, but operational. Behind him were M. Sarkis, Sir Bertram Wycliffe, and Ostermann, the real one, in his bathrobe.

"Where is he?" said Maddox. His voice was hoarse. "I had my suspicions at the bar, something wrong in the voice, the manner. I went back to my room to think it over and lit a cigar. After that I remember nothing until I was on the floor." He stopped, apparently for reasons of professional self-control. "Every single cigar in the case. Doctored the whole supply. Where is he?"

"Gone," I said.

Maddox received this with the stillness of a man exercising considerable restraint.

Abu Zahir moved through the group with the contained purpose of a man who has finished with one phase of an evening and is ready for the next. From inside his *gibbeh* he produced a leather pouch and set it on the surface of the corridor table.

"The contents of the room that Omar was using," he said. "He had not yet had the occasion to remove his evening's work before I reached it." He opened the pouch and laid the pieces on the table in turn: the rope of pearls, the tiara, and—extended to me on his open palm—the Hatshepsut scarab. I turned the bezel. The cartouche was there: correct, ancient, entirely itself.

"The diamonds?" said Ostermann, from within his bathrobe, with the focused urgency of a man with a professional priority.

"I am afraid not," said Abu Zahir. "Those, I believe, he had already dispatched."

He inclined his head to the assembled company—the grave, unhurried bow that ends all our meetings—and walked away along the corridor.

"Stop him!" said Maddox. "He's a material witness at the very—"

"He will be available," I said, "when he chooses to be."

I was aware, crossing the quiet garden on my way to bed, of the heritage suite window standing open above the *mushrabiyyeh* projection, the bougainvillea trailing around it undisturbed, the palm throwing its shadow on the path below. The city was very

quiet at that hour and very old, and the jasmine was still strong in the warm air.

Abu Zahir's sister Fatima was, as he had said and as I had not previously known, the daughter of the Director of the Fayum governorate—Abu Zahir himself being the eldest son of a family that had been part of that province's administrative and religious establishment for three generations. This information, which explained a great deal about the authority he deployed so quietly, had not been offered voluntarily and I had not expected it at half past one in the morning in a disordered hotel suite in front of a Scotland Yard inspector and a man in a bathrobe.

Omar of Isfahan had left the hotel empty-handed of everything he had come for: the Ostermann diamonds aside, which I doubted very much Interpol would recover, he had taken nothing. The Director's daughter's jewels were safe in a location Abu Zahir declined to specify. Daphne Wycliffe had her pearls back. Mrs. Van Doorn had her tiara. I had my scarab.

The Father of Thieves, as the evening had made abundantly clear, was considerably better at his occupation than any of us were at ours. The difference, on this occasion, was that the trap he had walked into had been constructed by someone who was, in his own quiet way, equally formidable.

I went to bed thinking about a white-robed figure moving through my arms at speed, heading for the southern gate with the purposeful stride of someone who had calculated that exit in advance and had needed a convenient landing platform at the

bottom. Abu Zahir had said: *he was descending*. Not falling. Not dropping. Descending.

Omar of Isfahan had used me as a step on his way out. I found this both accurate and extremely difficult to accept.

CHAPTER FIVE

BREATH OF ALLAH

For close upon a week I had been spending my mornings in the Suk el-Attarin, dressed in the working clothes I had adopted for the purpose—dark trousers, a plain jacket over a *galabiyya*, a cotton headscarf pulled loosely around my face against the dust—sleeping each night in a room above a printshop in the Gamaleya, and steadily accumulating the kind of knowledge that is only available to someone who stays in one place long enough to become part of it. The patterns of delivery and collection at the shop of Mohammed er-Rahman, the most respected *attár* in Cairo's ancient perfumers' district; the daily rhythms of the narrow street; the faces of the regular visitors: I observed all of it with the patient attention I have learned to apply to situations where patience is the only approach that actually works.

I should explain the commercial background of this enterprise, since it is the background that explains—or at any rate mitigates—everything that followed.

A year earlier, at considerable expense and through a chain of intermediaries whose discretion I relied upon, I had obtained a small quantity of a perfume called "Breath of Allah." This was not a trade name; it was simply what the people of the Islamic Quarter had always called it, with the confidence of people who believe the description accurate. The perfume was a compound of such complexity and beauty that I had never encountered anything comparable, and I have spent a professional life handling the

aromatic products of several civilizations. I sent a sample to Lloyd Llewellyn at Pendleton & Morne with a note suggesting it might interest their clients in the fragrance trade.

The letter I received some ten months later was briefer than Llewellyn's usual communications and contained these words, underlined in red: *Our client, Maison Favier of Paris, has subjected the sample to the most thorough analysis available. Several constituent elements defeat identification entirely, and twenty-two attempts to create working substitutes have produced twenty-two failures. The overall character of the blend cannot be replicated. If you are able to obtain the original prescription by whatever means prove practical, Maison Favier is prepared to be extremely generous.*

"Extremely generous" was underlined twice.

The original prescription was held by the family of the Lady Zuleyka, whose lineage ran back, as I had established through a year's quiet inquiry, to a wife of the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, who had received it as a gift from the physician and philosopher Ibn Sina of Bukhara sometime around the year 1010 CE. The formula had been in the family for a thousand years. The annual preparation—conducted on the eve of the Mawlid al-Nabi, the Prophet's birthday, each year without exception—was carried out by Mohammed er-Rahman, whose father had done it before him and grandfather before that: a private ritual of considerable antiquity and, until recently, impenetrable secrecy.

The morning of which I must speak began with the kind of entirely unearned good fortune that one can only accept with gratitude and exploit at speed.

I was proceeding along the Sharia al-Hamzawi, thinking about Mohammed er-Rahman and the problem of the formula, when a voice called from a window directly above me.

"Said! Said!"

I glanced up without supposing the call referred to me. An elderly man of respectable appearance was peering from the first floor, shading his eyes against the morning sun with a hand that trembled slightly.

"Surely," he cried, "it is none other than Said, the nephew of Yusuf Khalig! Peace be upon you, Said!"

"And upon you, peace," I replied, standing still to take stock. The man squinted at me with the intensity of someone for whom the world has become a matter of general shapes rather than specific details, and his certainty had the quality of a man who sees what he expects to see.

"Would you do me a service, Said? Come up, come up."

I entered the door and mounted to a room where the old man—who introduced himself as Abdul al-Khalil, known in the quarter as Abdul the Know-All, a contractor of porters and carriers for the neighborhood's traditional merchants—lay on a divan by the window suffering from what he described as a recurrence of an old injury. He ran through his credentials with the enthusiasm of someone who has been waiting a long time for an audience: thirty years in the trade, half the quarter's merchants in his debt,

never once—not once—failed to personally supervise the annual transport of Mohammed er-Rahman's materials from the manufacturer at Shubra to the Attarin shop.

Until today, when his back had made that personal supervision impossible.

"I have a note for Mohammed, making you known to him," said Abdul, with the serenity of a man who has decided God has sent him a solution and it would be ungracious to examine it too closely. "Your task is to carry a chest from Mohammed's storeroom at Shubra to his shop in the Suk el-Attarin. It is a small chest. It is not particularly heavy."

It was, in fact, extremely heavy. I discovered this approximately forty minutes later at the Shubra address, where Mohammed er-Rahman's factor presented me with a padlocked brass chest of antique construction and the information that I was expected at the shop by ten o'clock and that it was now nine-fifteen. I occupied the journey in thinking about the commercial opportunity that Abdul's myopia had placed in my hands and in developing, between periods of necessary rest, a plan for using it.

The city was in the first stages of Mawlid preparations: the streets around the Husayn mosque hung with coloured lights, the air carrying the compound of grilled food and incense and woodsmoke that belongs to this week of the year. I set the chest down on the flags at the entrance to the Suk el-Attarin and rested on it for a few minutes, breathing.

The Street of the Perfumers is one of the few places in Cairo that exists in genuine continuity with its medieval past—not because it has been preserved exactly, but because the trade of aromatics has changed so little that the same essences sold there in the Fatimid period are sold there now. The smell of the place is extraordinary: layers of rose water and musk and benzoin and ambergris and myrrh, a concentrated aromatic atmosphere that occupies physical space. Through it all, as a recurring note through a complex chord, runs the cold clarity of cedar.

Mohammed er-Rahman's shop was the smallest and least advertised in the street, which in the *attár* trade is generally a sign of the highest standing. He received me with the resigned courtesy of a man accustomed to Abdul's substitutes, read the note, and led me down three stone steps into the cellar workshop that occupied the lower half of the building: a room of old plaster and rough beams, hung with a brass lamp, furnished with an ebony table inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a cushioned divan against one wall, and a quantity of equipment—alembics, measuring vessels, old glass flasks, a portable furnace and tripod arrangement—that looked as though it had not been significantly updated since the reign of some long-defunct dynasty. A small square window set high in the outer wall communicated with a narrow courtyard; through it I could see the upright shafts of a cart.

This, I understood, was where the ceremony would take place that night.

Mohammed was anxious to see me leave and I was reluctant to oblige him, being engaged in a leisurely inspection of the equipment while exploring the philosophical dimensions of haste and wisdom, a mode of conversation at which the inhabitants of Islamic Cairo are formidably skilled and which I had been practicing for four years. I had achieved perhaps three minutes of this when there was a sound at the entrance above and Mohammed went up the steps with a speed that was for him remarkable.

He came back down the steps seconds later, followed by a woman in a dark *abaya* and *niqab* who moved through the room as a person moves through territory they own by right. She wore a ring on each hand—the left one a deep green stone that even in the workshop's lamp had the unmistakable character of an important piece. She surveyed the workshop, found me immediately, and rested on me a gaze of cool and specific assessment.

Mohammed began to explain my presence in the elaborate apologetic Arabic that the situation seemed to require. His assistant Said, the nephew of Yusuf Khalig, sent by Abdul al-Khalil in place of Abdul himself, whose back—

"Yes," said the Lady Zuleyka, with the brevity of someone confirming what they have already deduced. She seated herself on the divan, set the leather satchel she carried carefully on the table beside her, and looked at me for a moment. "You have the look of someone who imagines himself to be unrecognised," she said pleasantly.

I said nothing, which was the only honest available response.

"There is a person outside," she continued, in the same tone, "whose responsibilities include ensuring this meeting is undisturbed. I will ask him to escort you out if you prefer. Or you may leave of your own accord, which would be more dignified." She extended one ringed hand in a brief gesture. "Either way: go."

I went. On my way up the steps I nearly met the large man who was apparently waiting at the entrance specifically for that instruction, and who communicated, without needing to say anything, that my exit was both expected and welcome.

I spent the forenoon at my flat in the Gamaleya imposing silent but creative curses upon my own judgment. The Lady Zuleyka had known from the moment she entered that I was not Said; of this I was now certain. Whether she also knew who I actually was, I could not be sure. What I was sure of was that I had one opportunity remaining, and that it would require a different approach.

The approach, by afternoon, had formed itself into a plan.

The narrow courtyard behind Mohammed's shop—into which the small square window opened, and which I had glimpsed through that window when I was inside—was accessible from a back lane that ran parallel to the Suk el-Attarin. The window itself would give me a direct sightline to the table where the Lady Zuleyka would be consulting the formula. If I could position myself at the window ledge with my phone's zoom camera pointed at the manuscript for long enough to capture the pages, the formula was as good as obtained.

The Suk el-Attarin at midnight on the eve of the Mawlid is a different street from its daytime self. The tourist traffic and the commercial noise are gone; the lanterns are lit in some of the doorways; the smell of the place intensifies in the quiet, as though the accumulated aromatics of the day have been released by the absence of people. I came to the corner of the street at half past eleven and looked carefully around it.

Abu Zahir was standing in front of Mohammed er-Rahman's shop.

He was there, as I now understood, in his capacity as the imam conducting the ritual blessing of each ingredient. He wore his black *gibbeh* and white turban, carried his ebony cane, and stood with his characteristic quality of composed patience. I drew back into the shadow.

Abu Zahir would recognise me immediately if I attempted to enter by the front. The front was not an option.

I found the back lane, found the high wall with its locked door, found the iron rod above the door's frame with an old hook depending from it, and went up by the route available. The drop into the courtyard was manageable. The cart was there, its shafts pointing at the night sky, exactly as I had seen it through the window that morning. A dim warm light came from the small square window in the workshop's outer wall.

I climbed into the cart and raised myself to the level of the window ledge.

Mohammed er-Rahman was inside, arranging the items on the table: the brass scales, the glass vessels, the alembics in their

order. Abu Zahir stood to one side, in a posture of focused readiness. The brazier was already lit, and he was adding to its charcoal small dark pastilles from a sandalwood box, and strips of paper on which writing was visible. The smoke from the brazier was blue and, in the lamp's light, faintly luminous.

I crouched down in the cart as footsteps approached from the street end of the courtyard. A car had stopped somewhere nearby; doors had closed; the Lady Zuleyka's voice gave brief instructions to whoever had brought her. Then her footsteps on the shop's entrance steps, the muffled sound of a door closing and being barred. The footsteps of whoever had accompanied her, receding.

I stood up again.

The Lady Zuleyka was seated on the divan, her leather satchel open on the table before her. From it she had taken a manuscript: perhaps twenty pages of aged paper in a board cover, the text a dense and very fine Arabic calligraphy, the ink brown with great age, the pages handled with the care of someone for whom the object has an importance beyond the merely historical. She held it open with both hands and did not set it down.

Abu Zahir began to recite: the opening chapter of the Quran, then the surah called "The Angel," and then, as the Lady Zuleyka began to read from the manuscript and indicate quantities to Mohammed, Abu Zahir extended his hands over the wide vessel on the table and named the four archangels: "Jibrail, Mika'il, Israfil, Izra'il." With each name, Mohammed added a measured quantity of one of the gold-stoppered vessels to the main vessel.

The blue smoke thickened. The lamp's light seemed to deepen rather than brighten.

I raised my phone above the window ledge and activated the camera, bringing it to zoom. The problem was angle: the manuscript lay flat on the table, held by the Lady Zuleyka, and I was above and to the side. I needed to bring myself further over the ledge. I eased forward, resting more weight on the sill, reaching for the angle at which the calligraphy on the page would be legible.

The lens gave me the table, the manuscript pages held open, Abu Zahir's moving lips, the blue smoke curling above the brazier.

And then the letters on the phone screen began to move.

I wish I could describe this phenomenon accurately. The image on the screen was clear. The problem was that the Arabic calligraphy of the ancient manuscript appeared to be rearranging itself: individual letters, and groups of letters, were detaching from their positions on the page and relocating with a deliberate unhurriedness. I watched a long vertical letter rise slowly from the lower margin and proceed, with great dignity, towards the upper edge of the page, where it disappeared beneath the Lady Zuleyka's thumb. The rest of the text continued its slow migration, and I found myself tracking individual letters with an absorption that I registered, from some remaining functional part of my brain, as not normal.

The blue smoke from the brazier had grown considerably thicker.

Abu Zahir's voice was still audible, but it had changed its nature. I was no longer receiving it as sound. I was receiving it as visible text: the words forming in the air above his head in letters of warm gold, remaining briefly legible, and then dissolving upward towards the ceiling. I read them with the same distant and helpless fascination with which I had been watching the letters migrate across the manuscript page.

From somewhere in the room, voices spoke that had no visible source.

A low, resonant tone, from the direction of the brazier: "I am myrrh. My voice is the voice of the tomb."

A softer voice, very close: "I am ambergris. I am the desire that does not diminish."

An edged and resinous voice, from somewhere above: "I am oud. I am the forest that has been gone a thousand years."

A quiet, sweet voice: "I am frankincense. I am the prayer that reaches heaven."

The room was expanding. I was certain of this in the way one is certain of things one is simultaneously aware may not be trustworthy: the walls were moving outward with a slow inevitability, the ceiling rising, the lamp receding upward into a vault that was growing towards the proportions of a great mosque. Abu Zahir, far below me now, had become a small figure. I observed that his arms had grown sinuous and very long, extending above the brazier in shapes that arms do not ordinarily form. His eyes, when I found them at this distance, were not eyes exactly; they were pools of absolute darkness that drew light inward

rather than reflecting it outward, and they were aimed at me with an attention I could not look away from and could not think clearly about.

I desired, with an urgency that broke through the general pleasant incapacity that had replaced my normal faculties, to remove myself from the window ledge.

I could not move.

My body from the neck down had become very heavy and unresponsive, as though gravity had been increased and I was carrying my share of the increase. I was not frightened, exactly. I was simply aware, with the clear and remote quality of someone watching this happen to a person nearby, that I was in significant difficulty.

Then I noticed, just below the outside of the window ledge, directly beneath my face, an object I had not previously observed. It was a small brass incense burner, no larger than a teacup, set on the ledge's outer edge with the deliberate placement of something arranged rather than accidental. A thick, slow stream of brown-grey vapor was rising from its perforated lid and entering the window along the underside of the sill, directly into the air I had been breathing for the past however-long-it-had-been.

A small voice spoke from the burner, in a tone of cheerful and entirely unwarranted satisfaction:

"I am cannabis. While you have been lying up there congratulating yourself on your cleverness, I have been systematically making it impossible for you to do anything

useful. The position you chose was very convenient for me. A person standing below this window and wishing to incapacitate someone above it could not have arranged matters better. I am grateful for your cooperation."

I fell off the window ledge.

The fall was not long—I had not been far above the cart—and it deposited me back among the cart's contents with a noise rather less dramatic than the preceding events had seemed to warrant. After that, various things happened in which I had no involvement.

I became conscious the following day shortly before noon, lying on the concrete floor of a holding cell at the Bab al-Khalq police station, with a headache of comprehensive thoroughness and the specific physical character of someone who has spent an extended period inhaling concentrated cannabis smoke through a small brass incense burner while suspended over a window ledge. A uniformed officer appeared when I announced my presence and informed me, with some enthusiasm, that I had been brought in the previous night apparently unconscious in the back of a vehicle, in a condition that had suggested, to the officer who received me, extreme intoxication.

I explained to the station superintendent that I had been attending a Mawlid celebration in the Gamaleya in informal clothes, that I had been the victim of what was probably a robbery-related assault on my way home, and that I remembered very little of what had happened after leaving a gathering in the Attarin. The superintendent was carefully disbelieving, which

under the circumstances was the kindest possible combination of responses. He arranged for a phone call, I sent for a change of clothes, and within two hours I was restored to something resembling my usual self.

My phone was not among the items the police had retained from my person, which I had assumed meant it had been lost during the fall and was presently somewhere in the courtyard of Mohammed er-Rahman's workshop.

I was preparing to leave the station—reviewing the various ways in which the past twenty-four hours had constituted an instructive failure and considering what adjustments I might make going forward—when Abu Zahir came through the entrance hall.

He was dressed with his usual precise neatness, the dark *gibbeh* exactly as always, the white turban wound with its characteristic care. He wore the expression of a man who has received genuinely troubling news and has come to offer appropriate sympathy, and his concern was, to all outward appearances, entirely real.

"Greaves Pasha," he said, in his flawless and unhurried English. "I learned of this unfortunate incident only this morning, and I came at once. I cannot adequately express how greatly it distresses me that such things should befall an acquaintance of mine in this city. I hope sincerely that you have suffered no lasting harm."

"I am quite recovered," I said. "I am much obliged for your concern."

"The streets around the Husayn during the Mawlid can be unpredictable," he said, "even for someone with your long knowledge of the quarter. I hope you will exercise appropriate caution in future." He paused, and reached inside his *gibbeh*. "I have here, I believe, your property. It was found not far from where you were—ah—discovered, and I thought it preferable to return it personally rather than leave it with the police."

He placed my phone in my hand. I looked at the screen. The camera app was still open, showing the last footage recorded: approximately six minutes of blue smoke and indistinct forms, and then forty seconds of the cart's interior as I had apparently continued filming while unconscious on the floor. The calligraphy of the Ibn Sina manuscript appeared, in total, for eleven seconds in the middle of the footage, blurred beyond legibility by the angle and the smoke. Not one line of the formula was readable.

Abu Zahir met my gaze with his dark and entirely steady eyes, and then permitted himself one of those complete, genuine, quietly devastating smiles that I have tried to describe in these accounts several times and have never done justice to.

"Good morning, Mr. Greaves," he said.

CHAPTER SIX

THE WHISPERING MUMMY

The venue to which Felix Verrall had taken me that evening was reached by climbing two flights of stairs above a copper merchant's shop in a lane off the Husayn quarter—a private music room of the kind that Cairo maintains in the spaces between its official cultural institutions, known to perhaps a hundred people in the whole city and carrying no sign or advertisement that might bring it to the attention of the other twenty-odd million. Verrall had been brought there by an Egyptian painter he knew and had returned six times in as many weeks. I understood why within minutes of our arrival.

The room was not large—perhaps fifteen metres across—and it was full: some sixty people on cushioned benches around three walls, the central space kept clear for the performers. The lighting was warm and low. The smell was of old wood and tobacco and the rose water that had been sprinkled on the floor in honor of the occasion. The occasion was the birthday of one of the regular musicians, and the ensemble was playing with the specific energy that celebrations produce.

I am not going to attempt to describe traditional Egyptian music in terms adequate to what it does. I have been listening to it for four years and I lack the vocabulary. The *darabukeh* and the Arab viol and the reed flute are doing something that requires time and accumulated attention to work, and the room understood this and gave it what it needed.

Felix Verrall was beside me on the bench, his large hands on his knees, entirely absorbed. He was forty-three, Parisian, the son of an Algerian mother and a Verrall father, and his paintings—large-format oils placing contemporary Egyptian life against the deep time of the country's history—had been shown at three Paris salons and acquired by two significant collections. He had been in Cairo six months and showed every sign of staying considerably longer. He spoke no Arabic and appeared genuinely untroubled by this.

He had brought me specifically to see a performer who worked under the name Shejeret ed-Durr—Tree of Pearls—and who was, he had told me with the intensity he brought to everything he found artistically significant, exactly what he needed for the painting he had been working on for three months.

I was formulating the thought that she was not coming and that we might as well leave when a sound ran through the room—not exactly applause and not exactly a murmur but a third thing specific to this kind of audience in this kind of context—and the musicians made space at the center, and Yasmina came in.

Her professional name was Shejeret ed-Durr. Her given name was Yasmina, and she came from a family of traditional dancers from the Qena region—the *ghawazi*, who have been performing in Egypt since long before any useful historical record. She was twenty-seven or twenty-eight, slim, with a quality of absolute physical precision that makes the best traditional dancers look like nothing else on earth. She wore the traditional performance dress, and the jewelry at her wrists and ankles caught the light.

Felix Verrall, beside me, had stopped breathing.

The dance she performed for the next fifteen minutes was the kind that defeats description in any language I have access to. I will say only that it was technically extraordinary and humanly moving, and that when it ended the room held its silence for a full three seconds before responding. That silence is the accurate measure of a performance that has been genuinely great.

As Yasmina moved through the room afterward—accepting congratulations, exchanging brief words at each bench—I became aware of a man seated alone in the alcove to the left of the performing space. I noticed him because the quality of his attention had not shifted from Yasmina since she entered. He was dressed in dark clothing and wore a black turban of the kind associated with certain Sufi orders, and his face held the particular expression of someone watching something they regard as their property being appreciated by other people. He addressed one brief remark to Yasmina as she passed. She responded with a courtesy that was also a deflection and moved on without pausing.

I looked again a few minutes later. He was gone.

From a small square window above and behind us, someone was watching. I had not registered the window until I felt the specific quality of being observed from a fixed point, and when I turned I saw, in the dim opening, a white-turbaned head regarding us with a steady and diagnostic attention.

I met the eyes of Ibrahim Abu Zahir, and understood from the brief movement of his hand that we should leave.

Getting Verrall out took some doing. He had introduced himself to Yasmina through me, made his proposal for modeling sessions, and she had agreed with the direct professionalism of someone who has received these requests before and evaluates them on their merits. He was trying to settle the details. I persuaded him the details could be arranged by phone and that we needed to go now, and between us we found the stairs and the street.

Two minutes later, in the lane outside, Abu Zahir appeared at my shoulder.

"The man in the black turban," I said.

"Ahmad es-Kebir," he said. "He has been following the dancer for four months. He believes himself to have a claim on her that she does not acknowledge and that she has no obligation to acknowledge. He is connected to a Sufi order of the old city, but his behavior in this matter is his own and not his order's. His Sheikh has been informed." He paused. "For your friend, the danger is not straightforward. Ahmad's mind has been occupied with this for a long time. It is not in good condition."

"Verrall's interest is entirely professional," I said.

"Ahmad's mind is not in a condition to make that distinction." Abu Zahir looked at me steadily. "Warn your friend. He works outside the European quarter and he is isolated from it. The methods these people employ when sufficiently provoked are not the methods of ordinary men. They are patient, they are inventive, and they understand fear very well."

He was gone into the lane before I could ask what he meant.

Felix Verrall's studio occupied the top floor of an old Cairene palace in a street near the al-Azhar mosque, accessible through a courtyard hung with a decaying *mushrabiyyeh* screen, up a stair that turned corners at angles that suggested the Arab architect had been opposed on principle to simplicity, into a large room under a high ceiling with north-facing windows and the accumulated light of the old city. He had taken the adjoining apartment as his living quarters three months earlier and had cut himself entirely off from the expatriate communities of Garden City and Zamalek. I visited him the morning after the performance, ostensibly for breakfast and actually to deliver Abu Zahir's warning.

The studio held, against the wall nearest the outer window, a sarcophagus.

I had known in the abstract that Verrall was working with borrowed historical materials; I had not fully appreciated what this meant until I was standing before it. The piece was Ptolemaic—the painted cedar case, the molded and gilded face on the lid, the hieroglyphic columns on the sides—and it had been lent by a cultural foundation that held several pieces on long-term institutional loan, for the duration of the project. The mummy was that of a dancer and entertainer, identified by the instrument register on the case's paintings: a woman of the late Ptolemaic period, two thousand years gone.

The painting on the large easel showed the studio itself: the artifacts, the draped fabrics, the high windows, a man—Verrall himself, or a figure based on him—seated at the work

table, and in the corner of the painted room the sarcophagus, its lid open, from the wrapped figure rising a spirit in the form of a priestess and dancer, her face turned down towards the seated man with an expression of ancient grief. The spirit had Yasmina's face.

The resemblance between Yasmina and the molded face on the sarcophagus lid was not the resemblance an artist seeks out and emphasizes in a subject. It was more specific than that: the same bone structure, the same set of the jaw, the same quality in the eyes. Whatever genetic thread ran from a Ptolemaic dancer through two thousand years of Egyptian population to a woman from Qena, it was visible in the two faces looking at each other across the room.

"Remarkable," I said.

"Yes," said Verrall, from the easel.

Yasmina was on the model's platform in the traditional dress he used for the painting, holding the stillness that good models develop—not inertness but a suspension of ordinary movement. Her eyes, when they moved to Verrall, held something I noted with a certain unease.

I delivered Abu Zahir's warning over coffee during the model's rest break. Verrall received it with the serene dismissiveness I had expected.

"I am not going to stop work on this picture because a man with a dangerous fixation disapproves," he said. "Cairo is not dangerous. And this painting is the best work I have ever done."

"You are working alone in a building in the old city, two steps from the medieval quarter," I said. "The al-Azhar district does not have the ambient security of the sixteenth arrondissement."

"I have a phone," he said.

"Use it," I said, "if anything seems wrong."

He promised, his eyes already moving back to the canvas.

During the month that followed I saw Verrall two or three times and found him enthusiastic about the picture's progress and untroubled by any sense of danger. The first indication that something had shifted came one afternoon when he asked me, with a casualness that didn't quite conceal the seriousness behind it, whether I believed in reincarnation.

I told him my personal views were of limited interest and asked why.

"The *ghawazi* are a continuous lineage," he said. "This is historically documented. The resemblance between Yasmina and the face on the sarcophagus is not coincidental. Either it is lineal or it is something else. I believe it is something else." He looked at me with the expression he reserved for his most extreme theoretical positions. "If the mummy were mine to examine properly—"

"It is not," I said.

"I know," he said. "But I believe Yasmina is this woman, returned."

It is one of the disadvantages of knowing brilliant people that their enthusiasms, even the unhinged ones, cannot be entirely dismissed.

Three days later she was gone. Verrall's call came in the late afternoon: Yasmina had not appeared for her scheduled session, had not responded to messages, and no one in her circle could account for her whereabouts. He had been to the police. He could hear in his own voice, he said, how he sounded, and he needed me to tell him he wasn't losing his mind.

I visited the studio that evening. He was not losing his mind, exactly. He was distraught in the way of someone who has been maintaining professional distance from an emotion for months and has suddenly had the distance removed. He talked about the painting, about the resemblance, about what Yasmina had said to him in their last session. He was not in good condition.

That night, very late, he arrived at my flat.

He stood in the doorway with the specific posture of someone who has experienced something frightening and has since walked some distance and has not decided how to describe what happened.

"She is dead," he said. "Yasmina."

"Sit down," I said. "Tell me."

He had been in the studio alone that evening, sitting in front of the unfinished canvas, looking at Yasmina's face in the painting. And the mummy had spoken to him. In her voice. In the broken French he had spent months teaching her. Just a few phrases, whispered from the direction of the open sarcophagus: *Felix. Because of you I lie dead in a grave in the desert. I died*

for you, Felix. I am so lonely. He had searched the studio immediately after. Nothing. No one. The street below the open window was empty from end to end.

I considered this for a long time.

"You are certain of what you heard?" I said.

"Completely," he said.

Verrall was not a man given to fantasy. His artistic work was technically rigorous and his temperament, despite his theoretical enthusiasms, was fundamentally empirical. He had heard something. The question was what.

I visited the studio the following morning and examined everything: the sarcophagus, the curtained window alcove, the adjoining room, the outer wall. Nothing. The window was open, as it generally was for ventilation; the street below was thirty feet down and empty. I sat on the divan and looked at the unfinished painting and thought about what Abu Zahir had said. *Patient, inventive, understand fear very well.*

That evening Verrall and I had arranged dinner and he did not appear. By ten I was sufficiently concerned to go to the studio.

The courtyard was quiet in the moonlight, the decaying *mushrabiyyeh* screen casting its shadow pattern on the old stone. The door at the foot of the stair was ajar, as it had been on previous visits. I climbed slowly, feeling my way around the bends in the dark.

The studio door was unlocked. I knocked, received no answer, entered. The lamp was burning. The smell of turpentine and old

cedar and tobacco. The painting on the easel, Yasmina's face in it, the spirit mid-ascent, the ancient grief. The sarcophagus against the wall. No Verrall.

I sat on the divan to wait.

I do not know how long I had been there—perhaps ten minutes, perhaps fifteen—when the room went still in a way that was different from ordinary quiet. I noticed this before I heard anything.

Then, in the stillness, an eerie whisper crept through the air.

I will not pretend that I was unmoved. I have spent time in genuinely dangerous situations and I am not a particularly impressionable person. But there is something specific to a voice in an empty room—a whispering voice in particular, which carries no register, no sex, no identifiable characteristic—that defeats the ordinary defenses more effectively than noise. I sat very still.

Felix, it breathed. Because of you I lie dead in a grave in the desert. I died for you, Felix. I am so lonely.

The words were in broken French. They came from the direction of the sarcophagus, or seemed to—a whisper's apparent origin is always uncertain. The mummy stood upright in its painted cedar case, the gilded face serene and depthless, the bandaged figure entirely still.

I did not believe it was supernatural. I was frightened regardless, which are different things, and it cost me a conscious effort to stand up from the divan and cross the room

and pull the heavy curtain fully aside from the window alcove. Empty. All three sections of the window open, the street below vacant from end to end. Behind the sarcophagus: nothing. Behind the easel: nothing. The adjacent room: nothing.

I went downstairs and into the courtyard and stood in the cool night air, and was aware, with mild irritation, that my hands were not entirely steady.

I had taken perhaps twenty paces towards the street when footsteps sounded around the corner, and on a reflex I had no time to examine I stepped into a gateway and waited.

It was Verrall, his face pale in the moonlight, walking with the specific quality of someone going somewhere they do not want to go but feel compelled to. I was about to call out when a second figure detached itself from the shadow on the opposite side of the street and moved towards the studio entrance.

I launched myself at it from behind with a speed that Abu Zahir clearly had not expected, because he made a sound of genuine surprise as I caught his arm.

"Greaves Pasha," he said, when we had sorted ourselves out.

"You were following him," I said.

"I have been following him for a week," he said. "I warned you the methods they use are not ordinary ones. I have seen what this kind of sustained psychological pressure produces in the end." He looked at me with his characteristic stillness. "Yasmina is alive. She has been sheltered by members of my network since she disappeared. Ahmad's people took her; I had her removed. She

is safe." He paused. "Come. There is something I want you to see."

He took me through three streets and into the courtyard of a small mosque I had passed many times without entering. He had a key. The stair to the minaret gallery was narrow and steep and climbed in near-total darkness. The gallery at the top was an iron balcony perhaps a meter wide running around the outside of the minaret at a height of thirty metres or more, with a clear view across the rooftops of the quarter in all directions.

Abu Zahir pointed.

I raised my opera glasses—I carry them habitually; they have been useful before—and found the roofline he indicated: the building to the left of Verrall's studio, two buildings along, its flat roof fully visible in the moonlight. A figure in dark clothing and a black turban was crossing it with slow care, carrying in his hand a length of bamboo or heavy reed, three or four metres long.

I watched him reach the edge. I watched him lie flat and begin, with methodical patience, to extend the bamboo pole over the edge of the building and downward in the direction of the studio's open window.

"A speaking tube," I said. "Curved at the end, to direct the voice through the window's side pane."

"He has used it three times this week," said Abu Zahir. "He has been learning the phrases in French from someone who overheard the modeling sessions. He is patient."

I looked at Ahmad es-Kebir lying on the roof with his speaking tube in the moonlight, and I thought about Verrall being drawn back night after night by a dead woman's voice, and about my own hands not being entirely steady after hearing it from across an empty room, and about the specific cruelty of knowing exactly which wound to press.

I took my Beretta from my jacket, rested it on the gallery rail, found Ahmad in my sights across the rooftops, and fired three shots.

At the third, Abu Zahir seized my wrist.

"Stop," he said, with a quality of urgency I had not previously heard in his voice. "You are on the gallery of a fourteenth-century mosque."

I became aware of this. The shot had in fact already produced this awareness, reverberating off the surrounding stone and the old minaret walls in a way that made the situation unmistakably clear. I put the pistol away.

The figure on the roof had thrown up one arm, lurched, and crawled off the far edge of the visible roofline. The bamboo pole clattered down the building's face and disappeared into the lane below. From somewhere in the streets, someone was shouting.

We found Verrall in his studio, very pale, holding his phone. The bamboo rod lay in the lane beneath the window. In the courtyard below there was blood on the stone, and a trail of it that led towards the side street and then disappeared before we could follow it. Ahmad es-Kebir had fled. Wounded, alive, gone.

"He will not return," said Abu Zahir, with the quality of certainty he reserves for statements of his own intention. "I have spoken with the Sheikh of his order. What Ahmad has been doing is not sanctioned and will not continue."

Verrall was looking at the canvas. The painting was three-quarters complete: Yasmina's face present in it, the old priestess caught mid-ascent, the man at the table bent under the weight of her reaching grief.

"Yasmina is alive," I told him. "She's been sheltered by a friend while this was being resolved. She will contact you when it's safe."

He looked at me, and then at Abu Zahir.

"When will it be safe?"

Abu Zahir met his gaze with the composed and slightly sorrowful directness he brings to things he has already decided. "It would be better," he said, "for the dancer, and for the peace of this quarter, if she returned to her family in Upper Egypt for the time being. Her presence here has attracted a kind of attention that I have done what I can to neutralize, but these situations resolve more cleanly with distance." He paused. "It would also be better for you, M. Verrall, if you returned to Paris for now. You have been here six months. You know the work. The painting will tell you what it needs."

"She agreed to this?" said Verrall.

"She agreed. She is a sensible young woman and she was frightened. The agreement was not difficult."

Verrall looked at the painting for a long time: Yasmina's face in the old cedar, the spirit caught exactly at the moment of departure, the expression between grief and anger and something older than either, the dance not yet finished, the canvas not yet complete. He picked up a brush, examined it, set it back in the jar of turpentine.

"I will come back," he said.

"You will be welcome," said Abu Zahir.

I looked at the painting once more before the lamp was turned off. The mummy in its painted case, serene, four thousand years patient. Yasmina's face on the ascending spirit, caught in the exact moment between one world and another, the expression not yet resolved, the canvas not yet answered. The ancient dancer and the modern one, two faces that were one face, looking at each other across the long and crowded distance of time.

I followed Abu Zahir down the dark stair and out into the quarter, where the streets were quiet and the city—which has been practicing patience for longer than any individual life or ambition can conceive—continued its business in the old lanes with its usual, comprehensive, and entirely undisturbed indifference to the concerns of individuals. I had spent six months in these stories and I was not certain I had learned anything that the city had not already known. But I thought I was getting better at listening.

PART TWO

OTHER TALES

CHAPTER SEVEN

LORD OF THE JACKALS

The six cases I have set down above represent my direct experience of what I have come to think of as the hidden life of Cairo—the city as it reveals itself to those who stay long enough and pay close enough attention to be trusted with its secrets. What follows is different in character. These are stories I collected rather than experienced: accounts told to me at various points during my years in this city, by people who had something they needed to set down and chose, for reasons of their own, to set it down with me.

I have written each account as closely as I can to the version I heard, though all have passed through my own understanding in the transcription and I cannot claim pure fidelity to any of them. The events, as I have been able to verify them, I believe to be true. Together they form a different kind of portrait of the same country—Egypt as it presents itself not to those who are living through its events but to those sitting, at some remove, listening to the events of others. I have found this second kind of education no less instructive than the first.

The gathering was on a terrace in Zamalek, one of those summer evenings when Cairo cools towards something approaching bearable after dark and the city acquires for an hour or two the quality of a place one has actually chosen rather than simply

ended up in. Our host was Ferrier of the Egyptian Civil Service, who had a reputation for knowing everyone worth knowing in the expatriate community and most people worth knowing outside it. The group that evening included an Italian water rights journalist, a Coptic professor from Ain Shams who was the only person present who had actually read the book whose title everyone else was citing, and René de Flassans—who was in his mid-seventies, had served as a French cultural attaché in Egypt for the better part of forty years, and had the manner of a man who has seen considerably more than he has chosen to discuss and has been waiting, without urgency, for the right occasion.

The conversation had arrived, as Cairo conversations tend to do, at the question of the country's deeper strangeness—the quality that defeats analysis, that persists through every political upheaval and economic shift, that makes Egypt different from everywhere else in a way that is very difficult to articulate without sounding like a tourist. Various explanations had been offered. Then someone asked René de Flassans what he thought.

He was quiet for a moment. He set down his glass. Then he said: "I will tell you what happened to me instead. In those days, of course—"

And he told us this story.

In those days (said René de Flassans, looking out at the darkened river) I had not yet learned to distinguish between what I intended and what I deserved. I was twenty-five years old,

newly arrived in Egypt on a cultural development posting, and I had the certainty of a young man who has not yet discovered how much territory lies between ambition and outcome.

My work took me into the western desert—the old caravan routes connecting the Fayum to the great oases, which interested me for reasons of cultural history that seemed more important to me then than they do now. I had done two or three short expeditions, I had read everything available, and I had not yet fully grasped the difference between reading about a place and being in it.

On a certain evening, at the end of a day in the saddle that had been considerably more taxing than I had foreseen, I came with my guide Yusuf and a Sudanese companion called Ibrahim to an encampment of Bedouin. I will not name the tribe, for reasons that will become clear. Their sheikh was a man named Said Mohammed: lean, composed, perhaps sixty, with the bearing of someone who has spent a long life making decisions under pressure and has arrived at a settled relationship with that fact. He received us with the hospitality of the desert, and we were given a tent, and we were fed.

You know the expression 'desert hospitality.' You have perhaps heard it romanticized. I am not going to romanticize it. It is a moral institution, exact and demanding in both directions. The spear planted before the tent door means something specific. A guest's obligations are as real as the host's, and they are not discharged by gratitude alone. I knew

this at the time. I tell you so that you understand I had no excuse.

But I am telling the story in order, and the violation came later. First there was the wanderer.

I had been at the camp for two nights and was sitting at the edge of the tents in the early evening—watching the sky perform that transition which is unlike anything else on earth, the desert going through its brief corridor of violet before the darkness claims everything—when I heard the dogs.

Every Bedouin camp has its dogs: the ugly, essential, mongrel camp dogs that serve as alarm system and general utility. I had learned to read their various registers. What I heard that evening was not any register I had heard before. They were afraid.

Out from between the tents they poured—ten or twelve of them—converging on something approaching from the east. And the sound they made was not the sound of dogs that have found a threat. It was the sound of dogs that have found something they cannot classify.

A figure was coming across the sand. Even at a distance, even in that light, something about the way he moved was wrong. He had a forward-tilted, loping gait—his center of gravity too far ahead of him, his arms swinging in a manner that suggested a different kind of body than the one I was looking at. He was old: I could see that as he came closer. His hair was gray and matted around an angular face. His clothes were rags, nothing more.

The dogs reached him as he came to the camp's edge and pulled him down.

I do not know exactly what moved me. I had a walking staff in my hand and I was among the dogs before I had decided to go. I hit and kicked and shouted, and the dogs fell back, and I crouched and raised the old man's head.

His eyes were remarkable—a pale yellowish-gray, nearly colourless, the eyes of some desert creature rather than a man—and the look in them when they found mine was not the look of someone who has just been pulled from a dog attack. It was measuring. Deliberate. Then, apparently satisfied with whatever it had found, it became something simpler and more direct.

He was thirsty. He indicated this with movements of his hands. Someone brought water and I poured it into his cracked mouth, and he drank with the specific quality of someone who has been without water for longer than is comfortable. When he could stand, he stood. The sheikh came through the gathering and said a few words; the old man nodded. He accepted food and wrapped it in a cloth and took the water jar, and before he left he looked at me once more with that measuring, satisfied gaze and touched his forehead and his breast in the Arabic salute. Then he went back into the desert the way he had come.

The entire camp watched him go in silence. Both of the dogs that had followed him returned an hour later. Two did not return.

I asked the sheikh about the wanderer. He was slow to answer. What he said, in the dialect I was still learning, was something like: a man of the desert who was known to everyone and

who belonged to nobody, and who had been walking these routes since before the sheikh's father was born. He said no more than that. But I noted that when the wanderer had passed, everyone in the camp had given him a respectful distance, and that the sheikh himself had shown him a kind of courtesy that was different in quality from ordinary courtesy.

I was awake early on the morning of my third day in the camp—the hour before sunrise, the desert briefly cold, the sky beginning its first gray preparations—when I heard a faint sound at the entrance of my tent.

The wanderer was standing there.

He gestured to me with his hands—patient, clear, repeated. He pointed towards the east, where the first pallor of dawn was establishing itself on the horizon. He pointed at me and at the ground, then at me and towards the eastern horizon, then made a motion with both hands that I read as urgency. Leave now. Before the sun rises. Go east.

I asked him why, in the Arabic I had. He made a gesture I had not seen before—hands moving together in a way that suggested compression, suffocation, the closing-in of something massive. Then he looked at me with those pale eyes and waited.

I told him I would consider it. He looked at me for a moment longer with an expression I chose to interpret as neutral, and then he was gone, moving away from the tent in that loping, too-forward way.

I did not leave. The sun came up, and I remained, and I told myself that I would go the following morning if nothing had come

of the next day. The girl had not yet appeared. I did not know that she existed.

The simoom arrived at mid-morning.

You know the *khamsin*, the spring dust wind that makes Cairo briefly unlivable? The simoom is different in character. It comes from further in the desert and it carries more sand, and it shuts out the sun. The Bedouin were prepared—their animals were tethered, their tent openings sealed—and I understood immediately why the wanderer had told me to leave before dawn. If I had been on the road when it hit, I would have been in serious difficulty. As it was, I spent four hours inside the sheikh's tent, wrapped in cloth, unable to breathe comfortably, listening to the desert do something that had no good word in French.

When it passed, I told myself that this was the danger the wanderer had foreseen. I believed it. I was wrong.

The sun emerged. The camp began to restore itself. And Sakina came out of her father's tent to shake the sand from a carpet, and the morning light found her arms.

I am not going to describe her in the manner of my generation and nationality, which had a tendency to produce in these situations a species of writing that does not bear rereading. I will say: she was twenty-two or twenty-three years old. She was the sheikh's daughter. She had a quality of composed self-possession that was unusual in someone that age and was, I think now, partly native to her and partly the product of being who she was in that place. When she glanced at me—briefly, taking

in my presence in the camp and evaluating it—I was, to use the only honest word, lost.

Her name was Sakina. She had studied at a French mission school west of the Fayum, which gave her French of a formal kind and a quality of considered irony that I had not expected. She found my Arabic genuinely amusing and said so. She had opinions about the French cultural relationship with the Arab world that were more precisely formed than mine, and she did not hesitate to express them. She was also, very clearly, the daughter of a man who had made his position in the world by knowing what people were thinking before they knew it themselves.

We met at the spring in the dusk for ten evenings. On the eleventh she told me that her father had made arrangements for her marriage to a man from another tribe. She would be gone within the month.

I asked her to come with me instead.

She was quiet for a long time. Then she said yes.

I want to be clear, as I told you I would be, about what this was. I had no intention of marriage. I was twenty-five and of Provence, and I was committing precisely the act I was committing, and I knew it, and I did it anyway. I am not asking for understanding. I am telling you the story correctly so that what happens next has its proper weight.

I put a sedative in the sentinel's evening drink. At an hour before dawn, Sakina came across the dark sand to where I waited with the horses. We were in the saddle before the camp had stirred.

We rode south and east for two hours and stopped in the shelter of a volcanic ridge—old black rock rising from the flat desert in formations that looked like the remains of something built a very long time ago. I helped Sakina from the saddle. She was tired but she had not once looked back. We had bread and dates and water and the specific madness of people who have done a thing and are committed to it.

Then something spoke to me.

Not a sound. Not a vision. Something interior—a change in the quality of the air, a turning of attention that felt external to myself, a quiet but urgent insistence that I raise my eyes to the ridge above us.

The wanderer was there. He was crouching on the highest point of the rock, watching us, with absolute stillness. I do not know how long he had been there. The pale eyes found mine across the distance, and the expression in them was one I had not seen before: not anger, not judgment, but something that was either grief or knowledge or some compound of the two.

Sakina saw him. She made a small involuntary sound and pressed against my arm. And the wanderer looked at her, and something moved in his face.

I heard the horses then. In that silence hoofbeats carry a great distance, and what I heard was the specific sound of people who have found a direction and are following it. Four riders at least, coming from the camp. Said Mohammed had discovered us.

I was already reaching for Sakina, already calculating, when the wanderer stood up on the highest rock and opened his mouth and cried.

I have spent forty years attempting to describe that sound, and I have not found the words. It was not human and it was not animal—or it was both at once, occupying some register between the two that I had not known existed. It touched something in the spine that is older than language, older than thought. Sakina went completely still beside me. I heard the pursuing horses rear and cry out.

From every crack and shadow in the rocks, jackals poured.

They came in complete silence. I have asked myself a hundred times whether I am remembering this correctly—whether the memory has been improved by the years, whether some ordinary event has become something else in the retelling of it to myself. I do not believe so. They came from holes and depressions and the shadows between rocks, in numbers that the landscape could not plausibly have held, and they moved towards the pursuing riders with the particular quality of things that have been called, not things that have decided.

The riders turned. Even Said Mohammed turned. I watched him wheel his horse, and I watched him look back once—at the jackals, at the rock where the wanderer stood—and I watched his face in that moment.

Then he raised his gun.

I do not know whether he saw Sakina clearly. In the growing light, at that distance, in the dust that the horses had raised,

I cannot be certain of what he was aiming at. The shot echoed off the volcanic rock and folded itself into the silence.

Sakina made a small soft sound and went down.

—

I will not tell you what Said Mohammed's face looked like when he reached us. There are things that belong to the people who have lived them and should not be translated into anyone else's language. He had killed his own daughter pursuing a man who had abused his hospitality, and he knew it, and the knowledge was written on him in the way that such knowledge is written.

He did not kill me. This is the correct moral calculation: to kill me would have been to compound one dishonor with another, and Said Mohammed was a man who understood these calculations completely. He told me to go. I went.

The wanderer had disappeared. The jackals were gone. The desert had returned to its ordinary character as if none of it had happened, as if the ridge and the sand and the old volcanic rock were exactly what they appeared to be and had always been.

I left Egypt within the week and did not return for seven years. When I did return I had become, I told myself, a different kind of man. I had accepted a number of things about myself. I had also, in the way that people do these things, arrived at a settled relationship with what I had done that did not require daily attention.

Fifteen years after the desert journey, my work brought me back to the western routes. I was with a larger group, properly equipped, experienced local guides. On the fourth day we came to

a well in a small depression—a little clustre of palms, rarely visited, known to my guides but not on any map I had seen.

As we came up over the last ridge, one of the guides stopped. He made a sound that was not fear, exactly. It was recognition.

The hollow was full of jackals.

They were ranged around the well in the hundreds, in the particular stillness of animals that have been there a long time and are not in any hurry to leave. They were not fighting. They were not eating. They were simply present, in a ring that extended outward perhaps twenty metres from the center, and they were completely silent.

At the center of the ring, beside the well, a man lay on his back.

I knew him before I reached him. The matted gray hair, the angular build, the way his body lay—even in death there was something in the posture that was specific and familiar. His face, when I made myself look at it, was the face of the wanderer: the pale yellowish-gray eyes open, looking at the sky above the palm trees with the expression of someone who has arrived somewhere and is entirely at peace about it.

He had been the lord of the jackals in life. In death, they had come to keep him company.

—

René de Flassans was quiet for a moment. The Nile moved in the darkness below the terrace. Someone's phone lit up briefly and was put away.

"The jackal is the guardian of the dead," the Coptic professor said finally. "Anubis, the weigher of souls. There is a thirteen-hundred-year chain of tradition that associates these animals with exactly that function."

René smiled, briefly. "I know. I have thought about it. I have also thought about the other thing."

"Which is?"

"That he warned me twice. The second time, when the jackals had already come, when the pursuit had already been turned back—he was still there. The danger was past and he was still watching. And I have wondered, for forty years now, whether if I had listened to him the first time—if I had left the camp before sunrise as he told me—Said Mohammed would have had no occasion to fire."

He looked at the river.

"That is the magic," he said. "Not the jackals. The jackals are merely strange. The magic is that he still came down from those rocks. I had ignored his warning. I had done exactly what I had done. And he came anyway, and he called them, and he drove off the pursuit for a man who had deserved nothing of the kind."

He picked up his glass.

"I have never understood it. I expect I will not."

I verified what I could of René de Flassans's account in the months that followed. His posting records and his desert expedition dates were consistent with what he described. I found no record of the specific incident among the Bedouin—the

shooting, the family—but I had not expected to. These things do not make it into records. What I could not verify and did not try to was the matter of the jackals, which I thought it unwise to pursue.

There is one thing I will add, which René did not know and I only learned later from Hassan al-Sughra, who had spent time in that part of the western desert during his fieldwork years. In certain Bedouin families of the region, there persists a tradition—Hassan was careful to describe it as a tradition rather than a belief—that a small number of individuals in each generation are born with what is called in the local Arabic a *khidma*: a service, an obligation, to the desert animals. These individuals are known, Hassan said, to the tribes they pass among, and are treated with a specific kind of respect that is not exactly reverence and is not exactly fear but lives in the space between them. They do not belong to any tribe. They walk the routes alone. And when they die, Hassan said, they are not buried. They are left at wells.

I do not offer this as an explanation. I offer it as additional data, which is what it is.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LURE OF SOULS

Bernard Wrenn had been lecturing in English literature at a Cairo university for eight years when I met him, and he had the specific quality that city produces in certain people after a certain length of time: a philosophical adjustment to its unpredictability, expressed as mild amusement at things that would have agitated him a decade earlier. He was an agreeable companion at golf—better than he should have been, given how little he seemed to practice—and we had settled into a habit of coffee on the terrace of the Heliopolis Marriott afterward, in the shade of the old palm garden, when the afternoon was hot enough to make the Nile seem like a reasonable distance away.

He had been in Cairo, he said once, too long to see it clearly and not long enough to stop noticing it, which he considered the ideal position.

I asked him once if he had a story of the kind I was collecting. He was quiet for a moment, in the way of people who are deciding how much to acknowledge. Then he said: "Yes. But it's a rotten story from a romantic point of view. I warn you now."

He told it to me, eventually, over two afternoons. It had the quality of a story that has been improved by the telling and arrived at a version the teller has settled on.

The life of a university lecturer in Cairo (said Wrenn, turning his glass in his hands) is not very eventful, taken all around. The duties are manageable, the summers are brutal, and any romantic notions one arrives with about the mystic East tend to be revised considerably by one's first experience of Cairo traffic. Personally, I made a more promising start than most. An adventure came my way on the very journey out, and it began—appropriate to the subject matter—on the ship.

I joined the vessel at Marseilles, having taken the train down from Paris on a warm September morning with more luggage than was sensible. The ship was one of those large cruise liners that go from the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal to the Indian Ocean—it was stopping at Alexandria for some passengers, including myself, before continuing to Mumbai. I had found a berth on deck, I had superintended the stowing of my cabin trunk with entirely excessive care, and I was feeling extremely pleased with the world.

I should explain what else was on the ship, because it bears directly on everything that follows.

In the ship's strong room, under the supervision of four very serious men who occupied a separate table in the dining room and were polite but essentially uncommunicative towards everyone else on board, was a Golconda diamond known as the Lure of Souls. You may have read about it when it was sold in Paris—there was considerable press coverage at the time, because the buyer's foundation had made the arrangement public as a statement about cultural repatriation. The stone had been in a French banking

family's private collection for a hundred years. The foundation, backed by an Indian philanthropist with ancestral roots in Rajasthan, purchased it at auction and chose to transport it back to India by sea, following, as they described it in the press release, the historical routes by which it had left. I thought this was romanticizing a logistics decision, but I admired the thought.

The four guardians—two Indian diplomatic security and two private protection specialists—received this observation, when I offered it at dinner on the second night, with the polite blankness of people who have heard all the opinions and are focused on getting the stone to Mumbai. Wexford, my neighbor at the chief officer's table, observed that they seemed peculiarly tense for people transporting something that had already been publicly announced and documented. I agreed that they seemed tense. Neither of us, at that point, had any idea why.

Wexford was called Adrian—a good-looking man of forty or so, American, with the easy confident manner of someone who travels a great deal and has found it smooths most surfaces. He said he was on his way to a series of NGO meetings in Cairo. He was excellent company: funny, well-read, interested in the ship's various passengers in a way that struck me as professional without being cold. I liked him considerably. I mention this because it is relevant.

The other person worth mentioning is the Reverend Mr. Carruthers, who was seated at the far end of the chief officer's table and who seemed, at first acquaintance, about as interesting

as the title suggests. He was a slight man of fifty with gold-rimmed glasses and the careful, diffident manner of someone who has learned to make himself easy to overlook. I did not pay him much attention at first. I was paying attention to someone else.

On the second evening out of Marseilles, as I sat on the boat deck watching the sun destroy itself magnificently over the western Mediterranean, I became aware that the aft corner cabin had opened and a woman was coming along the deck towards me.

She was veiled—I use the word simply because it is the accurate one; she wore the style of full face covering I had seen in photographs of Gulf families on holiday in European cities, the kind that leaves only the eyes visible. She had a richly embroidered shawl over her head and shoulders and she moved with the particular quality of someone who is accustomed to being looked at and has arranged to be indifferent to it. A companion followed several paces behind: a heavysset man with one eye, the other socket closed and sunken, his expression comprehensively neutral.

She became aware of me and turned back to her cabin. I had one glimpse, as she turned, of very dark and long eyes.

I am trying to describe the state of mind I was in at that period, so that you understand how strong an impression this made. I was twenty-eight years old and going to Egypt for the first time, and the entire Mediterranean was lit with the specific gold of late September, and I had been reading, on the train down from Paris, a very good novel set in Ottoman Istanbul. I want to be entirely clear that the impression I formed of this

woman was not based on accurate information. It was based on the interaction of whatever was actually there with everything I had brought with me from Paris.

Wexford, at dinner, told me she appeared to be from a wealthy Gulf family—Saudi or Emirati, he thought. She was traveling to Dubai via Alexandria, and the one-eyed man was apparently a kind of major-domo or senior household attendant. He had observed, Wexford said, that she seemed to be using the purchase of perfumes in the ship's boutique as a reason to spend time on deck, and that she seemed restless in her cabin.

I said that this was interesting.

"The guardians of the diamond," Wexford said, more quietly, "are carrying something in the strong room that cost forty-three million dollars at auction. I've been trying to work out the ship's security arrangements."

I did not, at the time, think anything of this. It seemed like something that a person with a professional interest in logistics would naturally think about.

I encountered the veiled woman the following morning on the promenade deck, and because I was twenty-eight and had been reading Ottoman novels, I contrived to be near enough when she dropped a silk handkerchief for it to be reasonable for me to return it. Her voice, thanking me in French—very good French, with a slight accent I could not place—was exactly what I would have wished it to be. Her eyes, above the veil, were the eyes I had been telling myself they would be.

She told me her name was Zerafa. I told her mine. We talked for twenty minutes in the way that people talk on ships, which is the same as the way people talk nowhere else—with the specific frankness that comes from knowing the conversation is bracketed, that the ship creates a context that will end in port. She was interested in the Lure of Souls, she said; she had read about the sale in the news. Had I seen the guardians? Did I know anyone on the committee?

I did not know anyone on the committee. But I was twenty-eight and the Mediterranean was doing the thing with the gold again, and I had a neighbor at dinner who was charming and apparently knowledgeable about security arrangements, and by the time I was back at my table for lunch I had formed a project.

I can account for it now in the same way I can account for most of my actions at that age: I wanted to impress someone. It is an entirely adequate explanation and requires no supplementary theories.

Wexford was, as I had expected, enthusiastic about the idea of arranging a private viewing. He said he knew Mr. Cairns, the chief officer, quite well already—they had talked for some time the previous evening about security arrangements on vessels of this class—and thought he could propose it. He was correct. The viewing was arranged for the day before Alexandria: a select group in Mr. Cairns's cabin, the guardians present, the strong room brought up for the occasion.

The people who attended were: the four guardians, Wexford and myself, Mr. Carruthers (who happened to be there when Wexford

issued the invitation and was included as a matter of courtesy), the ship's doctor's wife who collected gems as a hobby, and Zerafa—whose presence Wexford had managed to arrange through a series of intermediaries, since she could not simply be invited directly by two men she had only just met. Mrs. Hollis, the doctor's wife, performed the role of social sponsor with a cheerful condescension that Zerafa received without perceptible reaction.

Mr. Cairns locked the cabin door and made an elaborate show of doing so, for which Mrs. Hollis rewarded him with an appreciative laugh. It was a warm afternoon and the porthole was open. One of the guardians opened the case and removed the stone.

The Lure of Souls was, I suppose, what a forty-three-million-dollar Golconda diamond looks like. I am not a lapidary and I will not pretend to describe it. I will say that it was large and that when the light found it in the way the light in the cabin was finding it, there was something in the quality of what happened that was different from my experience of diamonds up to that point, which was admittedly limited. Wexford, beside me, let out a soft breath that might have been professional assessment or genuine admiration. It was not possible to tell.

We were each permitted to hold it. It was passed from person to person around the cabin. I passed it to Zerafa, who took it in her palm with the quick delight of someone seeing a thing they have wanted to see, and bent to examine it closely.

From somewhere behind me, from the direction of the open porthole, a dark object came twirling through the air and landed on Zerafa's wrist.

It was a scorpion. I can see it now: a large one, the kind that appears in desert travel writing as one of the standard hazards of Egypt. Zerafa's reaction was immediate and entirely natural: she cried out, brushed the thing from her wrist, and dropped the diamond. Then she swayed into my arms with a comprehensiveness that I found very convincing.

What happened in the next thirty seconds would have been comic if the consequences had not been serious. The four guardians, ignoring the scorpion entirely, went to the floor simultaneously in pursuit of the stone. Mrs. Hollis and I took Zerafa to the sofa. Mr. Cairns put his foot on the scorpion. Wexford—I noticed this at the time without knowing what to make of it—moved, briefly and without apparent purpose, towards the porthole, then stopped.

The cabin had been locked from the inside. No one could leave. The diamond was not on the floor.

Mr. Cairns handled this with a tact I still admire. He directed the ladies to an adjoining cabin for privacy, then invited every remaining person in the room to remove and submit their clothing for examination. He went first, setting an example of cheerful cooperation. Everyone followed in turn, including Mr. Carruthers last of all. No diamond. The ladies' cabin produced the same result. An ivory shirt button, ownership unclear, was found near the sofa.

Wexford caught me in the corridor afterward and said: "The scorpion had its tail cut off."

I asked him what that meant.

"A scorpion without its tail can't sting," he said. "Someone brought it aboard specifically for this purpose and threw it through the porthole on a prearranged signal. In the chaos, the diamond went out through the porthole to whoever was waiting on the deck outside. The trick only works if someone is at the porthole at the right moment." He paused. "And it only works if whoever is holding the diamond knows to drop it towards the porthole rather than away from it."

I looked at him for a moment. He met my gaze with the equable expression of a man sharing an interesting hypothesis.

At Alexandria, the guardians submitted to a search of their belongings that was exhaustive, official, and unsuccessful. Wexford's luggage was searched at the quay, a circumstance he accepted with resigned courtesy. Zerafa's attendant—the one-eyed man—was searched, and nothing was found. She herself was searched, separately, and nothing was found. The diamond had vanished as cleanly as if the Lure of Souls had lived up to its name and departed for wherever souls go.

I had been watching Zerafa during the searches. She accepted the indignity of the process with a quality of composed irritation that seemed entirely genuine. When it was over she departed without looking at me. I told myself this was because she was embarrassed or offended. I was wrong on both counts, but it took me some time to understand why.

The train from Alexandria to Cairo broke down outside Zagazig, which is a real town in the Delta that I had not previously known existed and which I was not, in the circumstances, best placed to appreciate. A delay of twelve hours was announced. The two functioning hotels were full within the first twenty minutes of this announcement, and I found myself, through the intervention of a resourceful sleeping-car attendant and a quantity of money, in possession of a room at a small private establishment near the center of town that smelled powerfully of something I could not identify.

The room had a bed, a ceiling fan that worked occasionally, and a shuttered window set into the interior wall. This window, I discovered when I pushed the shutter open to investigate a sound below, overlooked a lower room: a sort of inner courtyard apartment, reached from a different entrance.

Zerafa was seated at a table in the room below, her face uncovered for the first time.

She was not, as I had constructed her during the five days of the voyage, an Arabian woman of mysterious provenance. She was a European woman of perhaps thirty-five, with a French face—not classically beautiful but arresting, with high cheekbones and dark eyes that held a quality of alert attention I recognised, in retrospect, as professional assessment. Her one-eyed companion sat opposite her.

Between them, on the rough boards of the table, the Lure of Souls lay on its side, catching the lamplight.

I had been observing this for perhaps thirty seconds—time enough for several things to become clear—when the door of the room below opened.

The one-eyed man moved with a speed that was extraordinary in someone his size. He snatched the diamond from the table and, in a single practised movement, pressed it into the cavity of his sightless eye socket. By the time Wexford had cleared the doorframe with a revolver in his hand, the table was bare and the one-eyed man was sitting with the composed expression of someone who has nothing whatsoever to hide.

Wexford's face, in the lamplight from below, had changed completely from the face I had eaten dinner with for five days. The ease was gone, replaced by something harder and more directed. He kept the revolver level and very still.

"Out," he said, in French. To the one-eyed man, not to Zerafa.

The one-eyed man looked at him for a long moment and made the specific calculation that becomes visible on people's faces when they are deciding whether a gun is serious. Then he removed the stone from his eye socket and placed it on the table.

Wexford smiled, reached for the stone—

And from behind him, from the dark doorway, a second figure stepped forward, placed the muzzle of a compact revolver against Wexford's ear, and said, in a Scottish voice I had not previously heard from this man: "You've been wasting your time, Kessler."

Mr. Carruthers—the sepulchral, apparently unremarkable Mr. Carruthers, who had been at the far end of the chief officer's

table for five days and had never said anything interesting—was apparently not a clergyman at all. He reached past Wexford, took the Lure of Souls from the table without looking at it, and slipped it into his jacket pocket. Then he jerked his head towards the door. Wexford gave the small shrug of a man who has lost this particular round and walked out.

For perhaps three seconds, no one in the room moved.

Then the one-eyed man launched himself from his chair with a speed and accuracy that I would not have attributed to someone of his dimensions, bore Mr. Carruthers—or whoever he was—to the floor, and pinned him there with both hands at his throat.

I was downstairs and through the door in approximately twenty seconds, which was long enough for Zerafa to have taken the Lure of Souls from Mr. Carruthers' jacket pocket—which she had reached with the practised ease of someone for whom this kind of maneuver is familiar—and to have gone. The one-eyed man released his hold on the man he was strangling, stood up, and looked at me once with his single eye. Then he was gone too.

I helped Mr. Carruthers—whose name, he confirmed when he could speak again, was not Carruthers, and whose organization was one that I will describe only as international—to his feet. He had a set of excellent bruises forming on his throat and the specific expression of a professional who has done everything correctly and lost anyway.

"I've lost her," he said simply. "She knows this part of the world. I have no case against Kessler that will hold, but I am sorry to have lost the woman."

He answered my questions with the brevity of someone who has paperwork to file. The woman called Zerafa was not French but had been based in Paris; she had a considerable record of gem theft across several European jurisdictions and was known to work the same circuit regularly. She had gone after the Lure of Souls specifically, having apparently been following its legal journey through the Paris auction. She had booked the ship independently. She had been using me as a means of accessing the diamond viewing. And she had been considerably better at her occupation than anyone who had been watching for her.

The one-eyed man was her companion and accomplice; his eye socket had been adapted, at some point, specifically for this kind of purpose, which I found more impressive in retrospect than I found it at the time.

As for Wexford-Kessler—he had also gone after the diamond independently, had also recognised the ship as the opportunity, and had also been watching me as a potential asset, though he had been less prepared to exploit me directly than Zerafa had been. He was known to the same organization as Carruthers. There would be no charges because there was no provable theft on this trip—the diamond having departed before anyone had technically taken it, and its current legal status being a matter of some complexity.

The Lure of Souls was never recovered. The foundation eventually arranged for a different stone to be presented at the museum in Udaipur, with an explanation. The various legal

proceedings that followed the episode were, from what I understand, extensive and inconclusive.

I never saw Zerafa again.

Wrenn set down his coffee cup and looked at the old eucalyptus trees along the hotel's garden wall.

"You can see why I warned you," he said. "As an adventure, it lacks for nothing: international jewel thieves, a diamond in an eye socket, a detective who turns out to be a clergyman. But as a romance it is genuinely hopeless. The woman in the veil was using me as a tool. The interesting stone was gone before it could be properly appreciated. And I spent five days on a Mediterranean cruise being very pleased with myself for reasons that were almost entirely wrong."

He paused.

"The only thing I actually achieved," he said, "was to arrange a viewing that gave the thief access to the stone. If I had stayed in my cabin and read my novel, the Lure of Souls would probably be in Udaipur now."

He seemed to have made his peace with this, in the thorough way that people make peace with things after enough years have passed. The afternoon was cooling slightly towards the river.

I should note one small coda to Wrenn's account. Some months after he told it to me, I happened to mention the name Zerafa—casually, in passing—to Ibrahim Abu Zahir, in the context of a conversation about jewel theft in the eastern Mediterranean. He

was quiet for a moment, in the way he is quiet when he is deciding how much to say.

"I have heard this name," he said. "A woman of considerable professional accomplishment and highly selective employment. She is not, as far as I know, currently active."

I asked him if he knew what had happened to the Lure of Souls.

He gave me the small, contained smile that answers certain questions without answering them, and changed the subject. I did not press it. In my experience, the questions Abu Zahir declines to answer are the questions whose answers would only be troubling.

CHAPTER NINE

THE SECRET OF ISMAIL

I was in Alexandria on a brief trip for Pendleton & Morne—there was a collection of Coptic textiles being assessed for a private sale, and the dealer wanted a second opinion that he could route through a firm with a Mayfair address—and I was sitting on the Corniche in the late afternoon with a coffee, watching the Mediterranean perform its usual indifferent theatrics with the light, when I recognised Joseph Petraki at a table ten metres away.

He had changed. He was thinner, and something in his bearing had the quality of a man who has learned to take up less space in the world than his natural instincts would otherwise demand. He was drinking tea and looking at the sea with the particular stillness of someone who has no particular appointment and is not sure whether to be relieved about it.

I had last seen him in a street in the Darb el-Ahmar on a night when he had written out a confession under duress and I had told him certain things about the consequences of non-cooperation. The events of that evening were covered earlier in this account. What followed for Petraki was a period I knew about only in outline: he had submitted to the authorities, certain charges had been brought, and he had eventually arrived at some settlement whose details were not public. He had left Cairo.

I took my coffee to his table and sat down. He looked at me for a moment with the specific expression of a man identifying a

face from a context he was not expecting, and then he made a small resigned gesture that I interpreted as an invitation.

"Greaves," he said.

"Petraki. You look well."

"I look thinner," he said.

We sat for a moment with the sea between us and the various history between us, and then I ordered fresh coffee, and he said: "There is a story I have been wanting to tell someone, and I have not found the right person. I think you may be the right person, for reasons I cannot immediately explain."

"Tell it," I said.

And he did.

You will ask (he said) what my business was in the Wadi Araba, between the Beni Suef road and the Red Sea Hills. My answer is that it is not fully relevant to what I am about to tell you. I had commercial interests that required me, periodically, to be in the Eastern Desert. These interests are not in cotton, which is what I sometimes told people, and if you have any view on this I suggest you set it aside, because what happened to me in that desert is the point of the story and my commercial interests are not.

I had a camp in the wadi, in a limestone valley where the camels slept. It was the hour of the violet after-glow—which is, I tell you without embarrassment, the most beautiful thing in the natural world, the Egyptian desert at that particular moment when the light has not yet given up and the darkness has not yet

arrived. I was standing at the entrance to my tent and thinking of nothing in particular when my servants called.

A man was coming across the sand from the south. He was running, or trying to—more accurately he was doing what people do when they have been running for a long time and can no longer run but have not yet entirely stopped. He came over the slope of the wadi and fell when he saw the tent, and that was how I found Abdul Daoud.

I had seen men who had been in the desert too long. Abdul Daoud was in a condition beyond the ordinary descriptions of that state. He was thin as a mummy, gray and knotted, with sunken eyes that rolled in their sockets and skin that adhered to his bones in a way that made him look like something that had been preserved rather than something still living. He was perhaps fifty and looked a hundred. He clutched at my arm when I reached him and his grip was the grip of a man who has been holding onto something for a long distance and is not sure he can afford to stop.

I gave him water and bread and I sat beside him in the tent while he recovered, in degrees, the capacity for speech. He was from the Mazi area—a local man who had worked as a guide for desert expeditions in his younger years and had been doing something else for the past decade, the nature of which was not specified. His eyes, when they found mine, had the quality of eyes that have seen something and cannot un-see it.

He told me, in the intervals between drinking water, that four days to the south, in the direction of the porphyry quarries

and the hills the locals called the Mountain of Smoke, there was a village that was not on any map, in an oasis that was not known to any road. He had been there. He had seen something. He said the name once—Sheikh Ismail Ebn al As—and at the name his whole body contracted in a way that was not voluntary.

The secret of Ismail, he said. He had found it. He had come close to it. And now he had fled, three days and nights across the desert, because he had learned something about what happened to those who found it.

He had not slept in three days. He was burning with something that was not quite fever. He spoke in fragments that I was trying to assemble into a picture: an isolated family, generations old, entirely cut off from the modern world by their own choice. A compound of considerable size. A pavilion with a bronze door. A treasure.

"Not gold," he said at one point, with a kind of strangled urgency. "Not jewels. The treasure is something else. Something that they guard—"

He stopped. Looked to his left, over his shoulder, at the tent wall.

I am going to tell you now what I heard. I went to the tent entrance. I looked out into the wadi, right and left. There was nothing: my servants at their fire, the camels settling, the last violet fading from the sky. Nothing moved. Nothing was out of place.

I turned to go back to Abdul Daoud.

He was on the ground.

The sound he was making was not a scream exactly. It was a sound that occupied the register below screaming—a kind of gurgling, choking thing, the sound of a person in extremis who cannot form the right shape for what they are experiencing. He was on his hands and knees and blood was running from his mouth in a quantity that was alarming, and his eyes were showing mostly white, and one hand was clawing at his own face as though trying to dislodge something.

No one had entered the tent while I was at the entrance. I would stake my life on this. No one had passed me or come from any other direction. The tent had two sides and I had been standing at one of them for perhaps ten seconds.

The tongue of Abdul Daoud had been removed.

I will not describe what followed in the immediate term. I will say that he survived, that he was eventually cared for, and that he never told me anything further about the secret of Ismail, because he could tell no one anything further about anything ever again.

But I have a nature that is interested in secrets—this is perhaps my defining characteristic and perhaps the one that has caused me the most trouble—and I had heard enough of what Abdul Daoud said before he was silenced to know that four days to the south there was a village no one knew about and a man named Ismail who protected something worth protecting with the kind of determination that produces what I had just witnessed. My commercial interests took me periodically into the desert in any case. I prepared for a journey.

I will not make the journey itself longer than it needs to be. It was four days of extremely demanding terrain, in conditions of heat that I will describe only as not ideal. I found the oasis on the evening of the fourth day: lying in a shallow valley between two ridges of rock, invisible from any approach until you were within two kilometres, which is why it had never been found by anyone conducting surveys from the standard routes.

It was a real village—perhaps forty or fifty houses, date palms, a small mosque with a wooden minaret, tilled fields to one side, a source of water that I did not see but whose effects were visible in the greenness of everything. And at the far end of the village, surrounded by a white wall of considerable height, the compound of Sheikh Ismail.

I established myself in a shallow ravine to the east and observed for most of a day. The village had the quality of a place that has been cut off from everything outside it for long enough to have forgotten that everything outside it exists. The people I could see moved with the settled purposefulness of a community that does not need to negotiate with the twentieth century, let alone the twenty-first. There was no visible technology more recent than the wheel.

The dogs were my primary concern for the night approach. Every desert village has dogs, and they are early and reliable alarms. I have spent enough time in the desert to have some understanding of how to manage dogs, and I will say only that I

arrived at the foot of the compound wall without setting them off in a sustained way, though it required considerable patience.

A fig tree grew close to the wall on the north side. I took full advantage of it. The drop into the compound's garden was manageable.

The garden inside the wall was a paradise of the traditional kind: laid out with a care and regularity that spoke of long habitation and genuine love of the space. In the moonlight it was extraordinary—the smell of it, the sound of the water in the channels, the quality of the air that comes from a garden that has been tended for generations. I am not a sentimental man but I stood for a moment at the foot of the wall and simply breathed.

Then I saw the pavilion.

It was set apart from the main house, against the far wall of the garden. A small building with a domed roof and a bronze door—a door of the kind you see on treasury buildings and mausoleums, heavy and old, with decorative metalwork that caught the moonlight. Before the door sat two large men. Guards. They held drawn swords across their laps with the ease of people who have been sitting like this for a long time and find it natural.

From within the pavilion—from above the door, from a narrow window set high in the dome—a woman was singing.

I have heard a great deal of music in my life, in various contexts. The voice coming from that window, in that garden, in that silence, in the moonlight, was something I did not have a framework for. It was a traditional Arab love song—I recognised the words eventually, a poem about a lover asking a dove to lend

its wings—sung in a way that made it very clear that the singer was not singing it as an exercise. She was singing it because she had no other way to say what she needed to say, and the garden received it, and I stood in the shadows of the house and listened, and I felt the specific compound of joy and sorrow that beauty produces when it appears in the wrong context.

Then the dogs began.

Not at me—from the direction of the gate at the far end of the garden, a sudden uproar of dogs that had the quality of a distraction rather than a discovery. The two guards exchanged a look, stood, and went. Quickly, deliberately—as if they knew what the disturbance was and knew their duty. I would have time to wonder about this afterward.

I ran across the garden to the bronze door.

As I reached it, the singing stopped. In the silence that followed, a voice from the high window spoke my name.

Not my name. Not Petraki. A name—in the Arabic of someone educated in an old-fashioned way. She was calling for someone, and the name was not mine, but I understood in that moment that she had been expecting someone, and that I was standing where that person was supposed to be standing, and that she could not see me clearly in the dark.

A key wrapped in a piece of silk fell from the window and landed almost at my feet.

I heard the guards' footsteps, returning already, and I took the key and I put it in the lock of the bronze door, and I went inside.

The interior of the pavilion was something I was not prepared for. I have seen fine rooms in various countries, but this room was not fine in the way of wealth—it was fine in the way of care accumulated over time. The lamps were old, the hangings were old, the cushions and the silk were old, but all of it was perfectly kept, and the quality of a space that has been tended and lived in for generations is something that money alone cannot produce.

She was standing at the far end of the room, having just come through the inner door. She was perhaps twenty-three or twenty-four years old, wearing the dress of the household—traditional, perfectly arranged—and she was entirely beautiful in the specific way of someone who does not know they are beautiful and therefore cannot perform it.

We looked at each other.

Her expression went through several stages in quick succession: joy, recognition, then something much more alarming. She had been expecting someone else, and she knew, within two seconds of seeing me, that I was not that person. The colour left her face.

"O Allah," she whispered. "You are not my beloved. Who are you? What are you doing here?"

I have, as I said, a nature that is interested in secrets. I was about to explain myself when I heard, from outside the bronze door, the sound of footsteps.

Multiple footsteps. The guards, certainly. And other voices—men's voices, Arabic, the specific rapid Arabic of people acting

under orders. And below all of this, at the door itself, a soft knocking: three knocks, a pause, two more—the lover's signal.

She ran towards the door with a cry. I moved before she reached it, not knowing why, driven by some instinct about what was on the other side that turned out to be correct. The door burst open from the outside before she could reach the lock, and two large men in dark robes carried through it, between them, a young man whose face was streaming blood from a wound above his eye.

The people who followed them into the room were household members, servants. And last of all, having to bow slightly to pass through the doorway despite its height, a man I can only describe as the most frightening person I have ever been in a room with.

He was very tall and very old. In his face, age had produced not the softening that it sometimes produces but a kind of progressive sharpening—the nose a true hawk's nose, the eyes burning with a ferocious clarity, the jaw set with the specific quality of someone who has been right about everything important for a very long time. He wore the dress of his family's tradition with the ease of someone to whom modernity has never offered anything worth considering. In his right hand he carried nothing. He did not need to.

The girl made a sound that I will not describe and pressed herself against the far wall.

I was behind the alabaster couch. I was very still. I am not proud of this, but I tell it honestly: I was completely incapable of moving.

Sheikh Ismail Ebn al As stood over the young man who had been dragged to the floor before him, and he spoke with the kind of control that is worse than shouting because it indicates that the person using it has no reason to shout.

He said: "There have been others before you who discovered this place, or who came near to discovering it. Let me tell you their names and their fates, so that you understand the tradition into which you are entering."

He named a man called Mustapha Mirza, a Persian. He had come to this place and had seen what should not be seen. He lived now in Cairo near the Bab Zuwayla—and he was blind. He had no eyes.

He named a man called Hassan of the carpet sellers' market. He had come to this place and had laid his hands on what should not be touched. He still lived—and he had no hands.

He named a man called Abdul Daoud. He had come as close as this—perhaps not as close, but close enough—and had then fled and tried to speak of what he had nearly learned. He was alive, in the way that a man is alive when he cannot speak.

I was lying behind an alabaster couch approximately two metres from Sheikh Ismail Ebn al As, and I will not pretend that I was not afraid, because I was afraid in a way I had not previously imagined was possible.

"You," said the Sheikh to the young man on the floor, "have done all three of these things. You have seen. You have touched.

You have spoken—to others, to intermediaries, to various people in Cairo who have had various conversations. The punishments of those three men therefore fall to your portion. And beyond those punishments, since you have committed a greater trespass than any of them, you will receive something additional, which I am not going to specify in advance."

He made a gesture. The young man was dragged from the room.

The girl made no sound. Her face was entirely composed, with the specific composure of someone who has understood something completely and has decided to survive it.

Sheikh Ismail stood looking at her for a long moment. What was in his face—I could see it from my position behind the couch, at an angle—was not what I had expected. It was grief. A genuine, terrible, intimate grief, the grief of a parent who has caught a child in an act that has caused irreparable damage and does not know which of them to blame.

Then he turned and walked out of the pavilion, and the rest of the household followed him, and the bronze door closed.

I lay behind the couch for some time after the sound of footsteps died away. Then I stood up.

She looked at me. She was perhaps not entirely surprised—she had known there was someone else in the room, I think, from the moment Ismail entered, though she had said nothing—and she had the quality of someone operating at the end of their resources who has decided that whatever comes next is better than what has just happened.

"The key," she said. "You still have it."

I did. I had the key to the bronze door in my jacket pocket. I had kept it when I came in, because I am, as I have said, a person who thinks about exits.

We went through the garden without difficulty—the guards were elsewhere, in the courtyard with the young man and the Sheikh, doing what the Sheikh had told them to do, and I will not think about that any further. The fig tree served for our exit as it had served for my entrance. We were out of the compound and into the desert before the hour had changed.

She walked without complaint. She was stronger than she looked and had, I think, been preparing herself for something like this—not this exactly, but this category of event—for a long time. When the oasis was behind us and the Mountain of Smoke was receding into the dark, she said: “Where are we going?”

“Cairo,” I said. “Eventually.”

She said nothing to this. We walked.

Petraki picked up his tea glass, looked at it, set it down.

“I did not behave well by her,” he said, without looking at me. “In Cairo. She had no money and no papers and no connections in the city. I had taken her from one enclosed situation and placed her in a different enclosed situation, and I told myself that at least she was in Cairo and the city was around her even if she couldn’t fully reach it. I told myself various things.”

He looked at the sea.

“She was there for about two months. Then various things happened. I was arrested—you know about that. There were other

complications. She ended up being returned to someone who could look after her. Whether that was the right outcome or not, I have not been able to decide."

He appeared to mean it. I looked at him and I thought about the story he had just told me, and I thought about the story I already knew from the other end—the night in the Darb el-Ahmar, the old man with the scimitar, the terrified girl I had briefly held in my arms before Abu Zahir told me what had actually happened. The same story. The same people. I had been sitting in the middle of it for two years without knowing the first chapter.

"What was her name?" I asked.

He was quiet for a moment. "Bahija," he said.

I did not tell him what I knew. I was not certain what useful purpose it would have served. He had given me the story he needed to give someone, and the sea was doing its indifferent work with the light, and I had enough information to understand, now, the complete shape of something that had presented itself to me only in pieces.

The men who knew the secret of Ismail and had been punished for it: the blind Persian by the Bab Zuwayla, the handless man in the carpet market, the tongueless wanderer in the desert. Each of them, apparently, still moving in the city. Abu Zahir would know them—of course he would. Abu Zahir, custodian of the old city's history, would know everything that had happened and to whom and why, because that is what he is.

I paid for the coffee and we sat for a while longer, and then I left Petraki on the Corniche, looking at the Mediterranean

in the way of a man who has finished one conversation and not yet begun the next. The sea was doing the thing with the gold again. It does this every evening regardless of who is watching.

CHAPTER TEN

HARÛN PASHA

I will tell you this story (said Ferrier) with one reservation: I cannot confirm the specific location of the palace, I cannot confirm the name of the Pasha, and if pressed I will deny having told it. These conditions are the terms of a bargain that I stand by, not because I am afraid of anything but because I gave my word, and giving your word under duress does not, in my view, reduce the obligation. Set aside these conditions and you can take the story or leave it as you like. I offer no explanation. I pass it on as it happened.

You will understand the reservation when we get to the end.

Ferrier—who had spent twenty-two years in various roles in Egyptian government administration before moving into consultancy, and who had seen more of the country's interior workings than most people who have written about it—told this story at the Gezira Club over two drinks on a Tuesday evening when neither of us had anything pressing to do. He had the manner of someone who had been carrying a specific piece of information for a long time and had been waiting for an occasion that justified placing it somewhere.

You will know Carmichael (he said), or if you don't you will have encountered the type. Jack Carmichael was a Scottish irrigation engineer—Senior Wrangler from Cambridge, one of the best engineers in his department, capable of going about in Egypt

for five years and coming away speaking Arabic as though he had been born within twenty miles of the Husayn mosque. His cousin Robert is known for other qualities, but Jack was the useful one. He had a face like worked iron and eyes of a blue that was somehow simultaneously cold and engaged, and he inspired in people who worked with him the specific mixture of respect and exasperation that is produced by someone who is always right and knows it.

I had not seen him for some months when, on a Sunday evening at a club gathering of moderate size, he took the position in a philosophical discussion that nothing, absolutely nothing, was beyond the single-minded man's reach. This is a position that people arrive at in various ways; Carmichael arrived at it with the specific intensity of someone who has decided something for themselves and is laying out the reasoning rather than making an argument.

He elaborated. He said his own ambition—the actual private ambition he had been working towards since he came to Egypt—was to live as a pasha of the old school. Not a modern pasha, not an honorary title with a house in Zamalek, but the genuine article: a traditional household, a proper compound, an existence conducted according to principles that had been refined over several centuries and had been improved on by modernity in no meaningful respect. Someone to hold the book in front of him if he wanted to read, and to know when to take it away when he didn't. An existence of considered, complete, unhurried luxury,

with every detail arranged so that no decision needed to be made below a certain level of significance.

He extended his hands across the table, with the roughened palms and the engineer's calluses, and said: "I am working towards never doing another hand's turn of anything in my life."

We discussed this at some length and then dispersed. In the ordinary way of club conversations, I had largely forgotten about it by the following morning. I put it down to the whisky and to Carmichael's somewhat elevated sense of his own capabilities.

I was wrong. But I didn't know that yet.

About twelve months later, on a morning when I was touring the bazaars with some visitors from London who wanted to buy things and needed someone to stop them from being too badly overcharged, I found myself near the Suk el-Attarin—the Street of the Perfumers, which you know—and I was just passing the shop of Hassan, the large and somnolent perfumer who had done good business with me over the years, when I noticed the car.

It was a black SUV of considerable size, drawn up at the angle that suggested it had been there for some time. The driver was in his seat. On the step by the rear door sat a man who could only be described as a household guardian of the old-fashioned kind—a large, well-fed individual in traditional dress who had the look of someone occupying a very specific role and aware of it. He was asleep in the way of someone who sleeps as a professional habit in situations that don't require alertness.

This was not, in itself, remarkable. What was slightly more remarkable was the occupant of Hassan's shop.

Through the beaded curtain, visible in the dim interior, a woman was seated at the low counter, veiled and shawled in the manner of a woman from a very traditional household, with a female attendant beside her. Hassan himself was behind the counter, presenting small vials and bottles in the careful way he had with serious customers. The woman was examining the perfumes with an air of interest that was slightly too sustained for genuine interest.

I waited, in the way that a man with some time on his hands and an acquired habit of observation will wait, from the shadow of a doorway across the narrow lane.

The *mueddin* of the mosque directly above Hassan's shop appeared at the gallery for the noon call: the famous call to prayer, which you know as well as I do, which rings across the Islamic Quarter at certain hours and which has been doing so from that particular minaret for several hundred years. He was a young man with a fine voice and he performed his function with evident care. Then, as he came around to the gallery's south side, which overhung the shop, he performed his function with noticeably additional care.

He was singing directly at the woman in the shop.

She was not looking down—she was holding a small vial to the light and examining it—but the angle of her head had shifted in the particular way of someone who is receiving a communication while appearing not to.

I went into the shop afterward and spent twenty minutes discussing the relative merits of various attars with Hassan,

whose eyes throughout our conversation kept returning to the minaret above and who appeared to find my presence simultaneously welcome and inconvenient.

I mentioned the car at the door. He raised a finger to his lips. "She is from the household of the Pasha," he said quietly, in the tone of someone who considers the information both unavoidable and dangerous. "The Lady Zohara. She comes here sometimes, always with the guard. She is looking at perfumes."

"And the *mueddin*?" I said.

Hassan looked at the minaret. "That is my brother Said." He moved a small bottle unnecessarily from one side of the counter to the other. "He looks high when he sings. It is his way."

"Which Pasha?"

He was reluctant to say. What I got from him, over the following quarter-hour, was this: a man known locally as the Pasha maintained a private residence in Old Cairo, in the part of the city that tourists visit in the morning and locals avoid after dark, in a compound whose existence was essentially invisible from any street. He lived in a manner consistent with nothing built after approximately 1850. His household was extensive and very private—the staff did not circulate outside the compound. He was not like the other people who used the title Pasha, Hassan said, in the specific way that distinguished one class of person from another.

"How long has he been there?" I asked.

Hassan considered. "For as long as I have known the Attarin," he said. Which was not, on reflection, the answer to the question I had asked.

I should say, in my own defense, that the evening that followed was not planned. I had been in a restless humor—the London visitors had been exhausting, the bazaar had been hot, and something about the day's series of small observations had produced in me the specific dissatisfied curiosity that generally leads me into situations I have not thought through.

I hired a car to Old Cairo.

I will spare you the journey and tell you only what I found at the end of it. Old Cairo, south of the Islamic Quarter, south of the City of the Dead, close to where the river-road runs between the Coptic church and the Nile—I explored three streets before I found the wall. It was high, well-maintained, and had that specific quality of maintenance that indicates a wall that someone actually cares about rather than one maintained merely against collapse. At one place, a fig tree had grown against the outside face.

I looked at the fig tree for a moment and thought about the kind of person who climbs walls on impulse at eleven o'clock in the evening. Then I climbed the wall.

What I found on the other side I want to describe carefully, because nothing I say about it will be adequate. The garden was, on its own terms, extraordinary. It had been designed—or had grown, over sufficient time, into a state indistinguishable from design—in the manner of the great traditional gardens I had read

about but not expected to encounter outside a manuscript. The layout was precise and the planting was deliberate and the smell of it, the smell of a garden that has been tended for generations in the Egyptian night, is something that I still think about.

The palace itself, visible through the trees, was genuinely magnificent. I say this having spent twenty years in and out of Cairo's official buildings, its grand hotels, its formal residences. Those are impressive in the way of things that spend money on being impressive. This was impressive in the way of things that do not need to spend money because they have already arrived somewhere.

I moved through the garden with the care of a man who has realised, at approximately the midpoint of a bad idea, that the idea is bad but has not yet found a reason to turn around. I came to a low extension on the western face of the palace—newer than the main building, but old enough to have acquired the patina of age—and I followed the wall until I found a door.

Through the door, which was not locked, came a sound.

I will not try to characterize the sound precisely because it does not reflect well on the person producing it or on the person who caused it to be produced. I will say that it was the sound of someone being physically punished, and that I responded to it in the way that I have always responded to such sounds, which is to say impulsively and without adequate reflection on consequences.

I went through the door.

The room beyond was a sort of anteroom to a larger space, and in it a large man—the large man I had seen asleep on the car step that morning, now very much awake and very much distressed—was being dealt with by two equally large men on the orders of a third who watched with the expression of someone performing an administrative function. I will not describe what was being done. I will say that what I did next was to involve myself in a fight that, in retrospect, I was not going to win.

I was correct in this assessment. The fight lasted approximately forty seconds, at the end of which I was on the floor and trussed, and being helped, not gently, through a series of doors and passages and up several flights of stairs.

What I saw in the passages and rooms through which I was taken is another thing I want to describe carefully. The palace had been decorated with the accumulated result of long, patient, considered acquisition: not the kind of acquisition that involves a large budget and a consultant, but the kind that happens over many generations of people who buy specific things because those things are beautiful and then keep them because they remain beautiful. The effect of this is different from everything I had seen in official and private Egyptian interiors, and it was different in a way that was, I found, genuinely affecting. There is a quality in things that have been cared for across a long time that objects assembled quickly, however expensively, do not have.

A room of amber and gold. Silk cushions and old carpets and glass lamps burning actual oil that produced a light different in

quality from anything electrical. And on a large *dîwan*, amid all this amber and gold, a man.

He was large, bearded, white-turbaned, with the bearing of someone who has not needed to apologize for taking up space in a very long time. He was smoking from a long pipe. He looked at me with the patient curiosity of someone who has encountered unusual things before and has developed a workable method for encountering them.

"Sit," he said. In English. With a very slight Scottish accent.

I sat. Something in the back of my mind was already beginning to vibrate with the specific quality of a memory that wants to be identified and cannot yet be.

He told me, with the equanimity of a man discussing the weather, that a conspiracy within his household had reached its conclusion that evening: his companion, the Lady Zohara, had departed with a person whose description he did not elaborate, taking with her certain household members who had assisted in the arrangement. The guard who had permitted or failed to prevent this departure had been dealt with in the way that I had unfortunately witnessed. He regretted that I had witnessed it. He was accustomed, he said, to managing these matters with more discretion.

His story of domestic grievance was delivered with a quality of narrative control that I found, in the circumstances, impressive. There was also—I noticed it in the pauses, in the particular quality of the breath he took when he mentioned the

Lady Zohara—something genuine beneath it. He had cared about her. He had not cared well, or in ways that would withstand modern scrutiny, but the feeling itself was real.

"You came over my wall," he said eventually. "And you intervened in a household matter. These are significant offenses."

"I heard someone being hurt," I said.

"You were being honest to your nature," he said, in the tone of a man making an assessment rather than passing judgment. "I do not consider that an aggravating factor. Your situation might be worse."

He clapped his hands twice.

What followed is something I want to describe with precision, because precision is the only way to convey it accurately. I was escorted, by the same people who had captured me but now handling me more gently, through further passages and down stairs and along a stone corridor that had the quality of age in the way that only genuinely old stone has, to a series of rooms that had clearly been, at some period, used for secure confinement.

The Pasha—as I had begun to think of him, because his bearing made any other term feel inaccurate—walked beside me.

"I want you to look at something," he said, "so that you understand the nature of the evening."

He directed a light through the grating of one of the doors. Inside, a man sat on the floor with his back against the wall, in the attitude of someone who has been there for some time and has

accepted it. He was heavily bearded and somewhat the worse for his confinement, and his clothes, which had once been fine, were in a condition suggesting extended wear without maintenance. He raised his eyes to the light.

"This man," said the Pasha, "has been watching me for years. He studied my way of life, my manner of speech, my household arrangements, my habits—every detail. He constructed for himself, with considerable patience and skill, an exact replica of what I have built here. His intention was to take my place. To be me. He believed that a man of sufficient single-mindedness could achieve anything, even the displacement of an existing person from his own carefully constructed existence."

He allowed this to settle for a moment.

"He was incorrect," he said. "But I respect the ambition."

I was looking at the man in the cell.

I had been noticing, from the moment I entered the amber room, a quality in the Pasha that I could not quite locate. Something in the build of him, the specific colour of the eyes, the way he held his head when he spoke. I had been chasing a memory that kept moving just ahead of my reach. Now, looking at the man in the cell—who, stripped of the beard's growth and the filth of confinement, had the same build, the same eyes, the same head—the memory arrived.

I knew both faces. I was looking at both of them simultaneously.

"That man is British," I said. The words came out before I had evaluated whether to say them. "He is a British citizen. Whatever he has done, he has certain rights under—"

The Pasha placed his hand on my arm with a firmness that was entirely calm.

"He has every right," the Pasha said, "that I choose to extend to him. And I have chosen to extend to him his life, his health, his comfort, and the prospect of eventual release—when I am satisfied that his enthusiasm for this particular enterprise has passed. These are not small things. Now come back upstairs."

Back in the amber room, he poured something from a gold-covered vessel into two cups of very fine old porcelain. The gold covering was an elaborate piece of work, shaped and ornamented, and when he removed its lid to pour from it I noticed, through the neck of the vessel, the label of a Scotch whisky distillery that I recognised immediately.

I drank.

"You are going to leave my house," said the Pasha, "in a few moments, through the front door, and you will not return. In exchange for this, you will not discuss what you have seen here in any way that could be used to identify this residence, this household, or any person within it. You will not do this not because I am threatening you—though the situation does contain a certain amount of implied threat—but because, on reflection, you will understand that disclosure would serve no one well and would complicate a situation that is already adequately complicated."

He regarded me with a quality of attention that was perfectly equable.

"I think you are a man of your word," he said. "Am I correct?"

I said that he was.

"Good," he said. And then he winked at me. It was an elaborate wink—a slow, considered, highly specific communication that involved the upper half of the face in a way that a straightforward wink does not.

I had seen that wink before. There was only one person I had ever known who winked in quite that manner.

—

Ferrier set down his glass and looked out at the evening garden of the Gezira Club, where a group of children were conducting some argument at the edge of the pool.

"The palace is not near the Coptic Church in Old Cairo," he said. "The Pasha is not called Harûn. And if you ever find yourself in a situation where you need to identify someone from a wink—which God prevent—I should note that I have only ever, in my forty years in this country, encountered one man whose wink works in that particular way."

He looked at me.

"His name was Jack Carmichael," he said. "I leave you to draw whatever conclusions seem appropriate, and I ask you to remember the terms under which this story was offered."

He stood up, nodded, and went off to find whichever part of the club he preferred for the evening.

I kept Ferrier's terms, as I keep all such terms. But I want to note one thing about this story that has occupied me since I heard it.

Carmichael had said, at that long-ago club dinner, that a man of single purpose could achieve anything—any ambition, however unlikely. He had worked towards his particular ambition for years, with the patience and calculation that had made him the finest irrigation engineer in his department. And he had achieved it. He was living, in a real place in a real city, exactly as he had described wanting to live.

The man in the cell was the argument against him: the man who had also believed in single-minded ambition, had pursued it with equivalent patience and skill, and had been wrong. Or at least, had been wrong about which of them was more single-minded.

I have not been able to decide what the story proves. I do not think Ferrier knew either, which may be why he has been telling it to people.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
IN THE VALLEY OF THE SORCERESS

I met Edward Neville at a conference on Eighteenth Dynasty iconography at the Egyptian Museum, introduced by a colleague who thought we might have professional interests in common. Neville was a British Egyptologist attached to a joint research program between UCL and the Ministry of Antiquities—tall, spare, with the look of someone who has spent years doing precise physical work in bad light and has developed the patience that requires. His particular focus was the reign of Hatshepsut, the woman pharaoh whose statues were systematically defaced and whose name was erased from every monument on which it appeared, in what he described as the most thorough act of deliberate historical obliteration in the ancient record.

He had published a paper on this—"Hatshepsut, the Sorceress: Towards a Reading of the Erasure"—that had attracted attention in the field for the specific reason that it argued the destruction was not political expediency but something more literal. Those who had erased her, Neville argued, had done so not because she was inconvenient but because they were afraid. The inscriptions that remained, the ones that had somehow been missed or were too deeply carved to fully obliterate, contained references to practices that the priests of the succeeding reign treated not as political acts to be undone but as dangerous things to be contained. The erasure was not strategic. It was protective.

He told me all this with the precision of someone who has made the same argument many times and has adjusted it over the years to account for objections. Then he said: "I also have a practical account, if you want it. Of what happened when I attempted to verify the theory in the field."

I said that I wanted it.

He looked at me for a moment with the specific expression of someone deciding how much of an account to give. Then he told me this story.

You will know the site (said Neville, with the slight formality he never entirely lost even in casual conversation). The Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, on the west bank at Luxor, is one of the most visited sites in Egypt. Three colonnaded terraces against the limestone cliffs, built by the architect Sen-Mût in the reign of Hatshepsut, eighteen hundred years before Christ. The tourists come in coaches and spend an hour and take photographs and leave. What they do not see, because it is not part of the tour, is the high ground behind the upper terrace: a limestone plateau where the cliff face rises further, where there are tombs and shafts and excavation sites that have been worked, abandoned, worked again over more than a century.

That plateau is where my colleague Hallward was working when he died.

His theory was the same as mine, arrived at independently: that the tomb of Hatshepsut and the tomb of Sen-Mût lay together

at that site, that they had been deliberately concealed rather than merely lost, and that whatever was in them had been the basis for the destruction that followed. He had written to me three times from the camp. The first letter was excited, the second concerned, and the third—which arrived four days before I learned of his death—was written in the specific tone of someone who has decided to continue something that they are not certain they should continue.

In that third letter he mentioned the girl.

She had appeared at his camp several weeks into the excavation. She was young, perhaps early twenties, from a family in the area—he described her as Bisharîn in type, the desert tribes of the Eastern Desert, though what such a person would be doing on the west bank he couldn't explain. She had been in distress. She had asked for his protection. He had given it, awkwardly, by having a tent set up for her at a distance from the camp. Her name, he said, was Nadira.

"She is still here," he wrote, "and I'm not entirely sure I want her to leave, though I know I should. She has the most extraordinary eyes. I am working on the shaft as quickly as I can."

This was not, in itself, alarming. Hallward was a careful man, and his use of the phrase "as quickly as I can" was typical of his understated way with urgency. Then his workers deserted—the entire crew of fourteen, overnight, leaving no forwarding address and no explanation that anyone at the site could confirm—and Nadira disappeared at the same time.

Hallward was found three days later in his tent with a wound on his forearm from a cat bite. There are feral cats throughout the Luxor area, as there are throughout most of Egypt; they are a nuisance and occasionally a danger, and the Pasteur treatment for rabies is available at the hospital in town. Hallward had the treatment. It failed, in the specific and horrible way that the late-stage Pasteur protocol sometimes fails when treatment is delayed.

He died at the hospital in Luxor. The nurses who were with him at the end said that the sounds he made in his final hours were not the sounds associated with the standard progression of the disease. I will not pursue this further, because I am a scientist and not given to dramatizing medical reports. I will say only that the attending doctor, who was an experienced man, described Hallward's case as unlike any other he had seen.

I obtained the necessary permits, assembled a small team through the Ministry's introduction, and went to Deir el-Bahari to finish what Hallward had started.

The headman on my crew was a man named Hassan el-Sugra, who had worked desert excavations for twenty years and had a reputation for steadiness under difficult conditions. He was a lean, angular man who spoke Arabic and some English and who had about him the quality of someone who has encountered most of what the desert can offer and has arrived at a working relationship with it. He showed no reaction when I described the site and what had happened there. He simply asked about the equipment and the timeline and began organizing.

My first surprise came on the morning of arrival.

Hallward's shaft—for which I had his plans and his notes and his photographs, showing it at a depth of approximately eight metres through limestone that was admittedly difficult—had been filled in.

Not collapsed. Not silted. *Filled:* with packed rubble and sand and broken limestone that showed the specific quality of material that has been deliberately placed rather than naturally deposited. Someone had done a considerable amount of work to close this shaft, and had done it after Hallward was taken to the hospital, and before I arrived.

I asked Hassan about it. He spread his hands in the particular gesture that I had come to understand as meaning: *I can see it, I have no explanation, I am reserving judgment.*

We started clearing it. The work was harder than it should have been, because the material had been packed with care, and we lost the first day to the upper two metres. But Hallward's notes were accurate and my crew was experienced, and by the evening of the second day we had reached a depth that suggested two more days would see us through to his original stopping point.

That evening I was sitting at the edge of the plateau in the last light, with the Temple of Hatshepsut below me and the Nile somewhere beyond the cultivation, and the specific quality of silence that comes to this site after the tourist coaches have gone and the Valley resumes its actual character. The sound of a reed pipe from the village below lasted for a few minutes and

then stopped. A dog barked and was quiet. The sky went through its changes.

I turned in early and slept well, which I attribute to the physical labor of the day. And then, in the gray hour before dawn, something woke me.

I lay still and tried to identify it. The first thing I noticed was the dogs in the village below. They were making a sound that I want to describe carefully because the specific quality of it was important: not a sound of alertness, not the bark of animals that have found something to warn against, but a sound with a different frequency entirely, the sound of animals that are responding to a presence they cannot classify and are not sure how to address. It began, it became briefly very loud, and then it died away—which is not what village dogs do when a person or an animal approaches. It is what they do when something passes.

I had the specific and entirely irrational sense that whatever had silenced the dogs was now on the path from the village to the plateau.

I lay with this sense for five minutes, which became ten, and which is a long time to lie still with a feeling that something is approaching in the dark. And then the tent flap moved.

She was standing in the opening against the pre-dawn sky, and the light was that particular pre-dawn non-light that exists before either darkness or illumination, and in it her face had a

quality that I am going to describe precisely and without editorial comment.

It was a beautiful face. That is not the description. Many people have beautiful faces. This face had a quality that operated on me below the level at which beauty usually operates—below preference, below attraction, at some level that I can only locate by saying it felt like being addressed by something that knew which strings to pull because it had pulled them before. I am an Egyptologist. I have spent my professional life studying a woman whose face was destroyed from every monument because, the texts suggest, those who destroyed it understood exactly what a face like this could do.

She spoke.

She told me that she had fled from an unwanted marriage in the village. That she had no family who would protect her, no place to go. That she had been sleeping in the desert for three days. She described the desert in terms that were vivid and specific—the moon beating on her, the crawling things in the sand, the particular horror of being pursued across open ground. She spoke in Arabic and her Arabic was formal in the manner of the older dialects, the kind you encounter in manuscripts and not in conversation. Her voice had a quality that I want to describe carefully: it was the voice of someone who has been speaking for a very long time and has learned, through practice, exactly how to speak.

She said: "You have a sister at home, *effendim*. Would you see her hunted from rock to rock with nothing before her but dishonor?"

She said: "I can bear it no longer. Another night in the desert with the moon—"

I reached for my phone and turned on the torch and directed it at her face.

She fell back. Her eyes, in the light, were the eyes of a cat.

I mean this as description, not metaphor. The iris was the right colour and the pupil was the right shape and the effect was unmistakable and I have spent the years since deciding whether I saw what I think I saw or whether the light was wrong or whether I was not fully awake. I have not resolved this.

She raised her hand against the light.

I said: "You are an impostor. You were in Hallward's camp. He called you Nadira. I know who you are, and I will have nothing to do with you."

I said this to the torch beam rather than to her face, because I had learned in the preceding three minutes that looking directly at her face while forming a sentence of resistance was extremely difficult. This is not an assessment I make comfortably. I am, as I said, a scientist.

She stood for a moment in the altered light, and then she threw back her head in a gesture that I have seen described in Eighteenth Dynasty texts and in no other context that I can identify. Then she turned and left the tent.

I waited a moment and then looked out across the plateau. It was empty. The rock stood up gray in the pre-dawn and below it the desert stretched without interruption.

I slept badly for the rest of the night.

The next day's work was good. We were within two metres of Hallward's original depth by the end of the afternoon, and Hassan estimated that another full day would clear the shaft to the limestone roof of whatever passage lay beneath. The crew was tired but working. I ate alone at the edge of the plateau and watched the sun do what it does at that time of day and tried to think about Hatshepsut in historical rather than personal terms, which is my standard method of managing this site.

That night I sat outside the tent until midnight. Nothing moved on the plateau. The dogs in the village were quiet. The reed pipe played briefly and stopped. I went to sleep.

At the hour before dawn, the dogs began again.

This time I was outside and upright before the sound had fully formed, with my phone in my hand, the torch app open. I stood at the tent entrance and looked at the rock ridge that rose from the plateau's edge and tried to see what was there.

Something was there.

It was at the top of the ridge—a shape against the sky that resolved, as I watched, into something large and low-bodied, with a forward-slung quality to its silhouette. It was too large for a domestic cat. Too fluid for a dog. It moved with the specific quality of a feline predator in the way that no other animal moves, and when my torch found it the reflection came back green

and brilliant from a pair of eyes that were, by any measurement I could apply, larger than any cat's eyes should be.

I stepped forward. The shape dropped below the ridge and was gone.

I crossed the plateau at a run and reached the edge of the rock and directed the torch down the slope towards the temple.

A shape, dark, moving at speed, crossed the causeway far below and disappeared into the shadow of the cliff. It did not move like anything I have seen before or since, except in the bas-reliefs of the temple directly below me, where the same fluid forward-weighted motion is reproduced in stone with the accuracy of direct observation.

I went back to the tent. My crew, roused by my movement, had gathered. I told them it was jackals. Hassan es-Sugra looked at me with the expression of someone who has filed a different explanation and is allowing the official version to stand. I did not press it. We went back to sleep.

On the morning of the fourth day, the shaft was full again.

I stood at the edge of it and looked at the packed rubble—not as deep this time, two metres at most, but enough to represent half a day's clearing—and I experienced the specific cold feeling of a person who has done everything correctly and is being opposed by something that is not playing by rules they recognise.

Hassan was not at the camp.

I found his note weighed down with a piece of limestone on the mound of spoil from the previous day's excavation. His

handwriting was careful and his Arabic was the Arabic of someone who has had good schooling, and what he had written was short: *Fly, Neville Effendi. This is a haunted place.*

I stood on the plateau with the note in my hands and the temple below me and the cliff above me and the empty camp behind me, and I tore the note into small pieces, and I looked at the filled shaft, and I thought about Hatshepsut.

I thought about a woman who built the most beautiful temple in Egypt, who conducted trade expeditions to Punt and wars in Nubia, who came closer to absolute power than any woman in the ancient world, and who was afterward erased so completely that for three thousand years no one knew her name. I thought about what kind of person produces that kind of response in those who come after. I thought about the word on the temple walls that the priests had used in their inscriptions before they erased those too: *dangerous*.

Then I picked up a shovel and started clearing the shaft.

Neville told me this in Cairo over two hours of coffee at a café near the Egyptian Museum, with the traffic performing its usual argument outside. He told it with the precision of someone who has organized the facts carefully and does not propose to offer opinions on what they mean. When he finished he looked at his cup for a moment and then said: "I have been asked, periodically, whether I found what was in the shaft. I'm not going to answer that. Not because I'm being coy, but because some

information has a weight that I'm not sure I want to place in a story."

I did not press him. Some answers have the quality of conclusions, and this story, I thought, was not a story that wanted a conclusion.

I should note that Hassan el-Sugra is not, as far as I have been able to determine, currently available for excavation work on the west bank at Luxor. His whereabouts after the Deir el-Bahari job were not easy to trace. The last I heard, he had moved north and was doing consultancy work in the Delta, in regions where the desert is flat and the sites are shallow and nothing about the topography suggests a limestone cliff with old things sealed inside it. I know something about the kind of person who makes that kind of choice, and I did not judge him for it.

The girl with the cat's eyes I did not pursue. Neville's instinct—to name her, to refuse her, to look away while refusing—seemed to me then and seems to me now precisely correct. There is a tradition of faces that should be looked away from. Hatshepsut's subjects understood this three thousand years before the rest of us. The defacement of her images was not erasure. It was self-protection.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ES-SAMIT

Ibrahim Abu Zahir told me about the café in September of my fourth year in Cairo, in one of the brief intervals between the cases I have described above, when we were walking through the Khan Khalili in the late evening and he paused at a corner I had passed a hundred times without paying it attention. Through a narrow door, past a beaded curtain, a low-ceilinged room opened up—perhaps twenty tables, old tiles on the walls, a ceiling blackened with the accumulated smoke of considerable history, and at the far end a raised wooden platform perhaps two metres square. On the platform sat a man.

He was perhaps seventy, with a white beard and the particular quality of stillness that certain performers have when the audience has not yet fully assembled: not waiting, exactly, but conserving. He held a long staff that he was going to need later. Around him, at tables that were filling steadily with people who seemed to know the layout and the procedure, an audience was gathering with the specific manner of people who do not need to be told what they are about to see.

"A *hakawati*," said Abu Zahir. "There are perhaps four or five left in Cairo who still perform in the traditional way. This one is called Hassan. He has been telling stories in this room for thirty years."

He found us a table. He ordered coffee. He settled into his chair with the ease of someone at home, which is the ease of Abu

Zahir in almost every room in the old city, and he looked at the platform, and the man on the platform looked at the room, and eventually the room was full enough and the man began.

He told the story of Es-Samit, the Silent One, which I set down here as closely as I can render it from my own Arabic and the notes I made afterward.

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful (said the hakawati, Hassan, striking his staff once on the platform), I will tell you the story of Es-Samit the merchant, and of his seventh and twin brother the unutterable Ahzab, and of a chest, and of the river, and of a woman who was called Jullanar, which means Pomegranate Flower, and who deserved a better pair of suitors than destiny provided.

Know, O people of discrimination and good sense, that our merchant was called Es-Samit, which means The Silent, because he had been silent in the womb while his twin brother howled, and had emerged from it in the same composed manner, and had maintained this policy without interruption for thirty-seven years. His father had named him accordingly. His mother had considered the name either a compliment or a reproach, depending on the day. His brother Ahzab—that charming catastrophe, that peacock of the marketplace, that man whose tongue moved faster than his mind and whose mind moved faster than his conscience—had found the name endlessly useful, for reasons that will become clear.

Es-Samit was a merchant of good reputation and moderate prosperity. He had fallen in love, in the absolute and catastrophic manner of a silent man who has kept all his capacity for feeling in reserve, with Jullanar, the daughter of the Walî—the governor of the district, a man of considerable power and the specific disposition of someone who has spent his life managing other people's problems and has developed a very short temper as a result.

Jullanar knew of Es-Samit's love and reciprocated it, in the way that the daughters of powerful governors sometimes reciprocate the love of men their fathers would not approve of, which is to say in secret and with significant practical difficulty. The difficulty was named Abu el-Hassan, son of the Kadi, who was Jullanar's betrothed and who had been made aware of Es-Samit's interest.

Abu el-Hassan had expressed his awareness of this interest by means of four large men sent to Es-Samit's shop with instructions. Es-Samit, being the kind of man he was, had declined to produce a sound during what followed, which had disconcerted the four men sufficiently that they did not complete their instructions. What he found on his return was his brother Ahzab, leaning against the doorframe with the expression of someone who has just done something remarkable and is arranging the story for maximum effect.

"I have driven them off," said Ahzab.

"You were hiding on the roof," said Es-Samit.

There was a brief silence.

"I was assessing the situation from an elevated position," said Ahzab, "in order to intervene at the most effective moment."

It was three days after this conversation that Jullanar's servant—a girl of considerable ingenuity employed for exactly this kind of purpose—brought Es-Samit the message that her mistress wished to see him one final time before the wedding, to bid him farewell, and that she had devised a method.

The method was this: Es-Samit was to have himself sealed inside a large commercial chest from his own shop, have it carried as goods to the Walî's house, and be admitted to Jullanar's apartments inside the chest. The servant would arrange for the interior guards to be elsewhere. Es-Samit would emerge, the meeting would take place, and the chest would depart.

Es-Samit, who had no better plan and was in the condition of a man who will agree to most things, agreed.

He shaved and bathed and put on his best clothes. He went to his shop. He opened the largest chest, removed from it the goods inside, arranged himself inside, and pulled the lid closed. He commended his soul to God, whose name he exalted.

Now by the beard of the Prophet (the hakawati said, striking his staff), Es-Samit reflected, as the porter lifted the chest and began to carry it through the streets, that there was no other man in Cairo who would have maintained silence under these conditions, being conveyed through the city on a porter's back with his knees pressed to his chin and his head at an angle inconsistent with dignity. His paucity of diction, he told

himself, was his most distinguished quality, and he had never had better cause to exercise it.

He told himself this with greater confidence before the porter dropped the chest on a stone bench to rest, producing an impact that brought Es-Samit's skull into close acquaintance with the chest's interior wall in a manner that he did not find agreeable. He told himself this with somewhat less confidence when the same thing happened at a second rest stop, and with considerably less confidence when the porter stumbled on a step and the chest arrived at the Walî's entrance at an angle that placed Es-Samit's soles above his head.

But he was silent. He was magnificently, heroically, agonizingly silent.

The chest was admitted to Jullanar's apartment by the intervention of the servant girl, who had managed the interior guards. The porter placed it on the silk cushion of a *dîwân* with the reversal of orientation that deposited Es-Samit on his hands and knees, like a man praying to the interior of a wooden box. Then a further piece of furniture was placed on top of the lid from outside, and Es-Samit found himself pinned.

He was reflecting on this situation with the philosophical composure available to a man upside-down in a chest in his best clothes when he heard a voice that he recognised speaking in the room.

It was Ahzab.

"Fear not, O my beloved," said Ahzab, in the specific voice he used when performing sincerity. "I am here. I came as the

porter, for I would not have you see me in the undignified position of someone crouching in a box. I put a servant in the chest to make it heavy."

A long silence from inside the chest.

"You are welcome," said Jullanar.

What followed inside the chest was not silence in the sense that Es-Samit had cultivated for thirty-seven years. It was a different quality of experience—the experience of a man who has maintained stillness through significant physical hardship and finds himself now confronting something that exceeds his reserves.

"Robber!" said Es-Samit. Or rather: said Es-Samit into the chest walls, which conducted his voice outward in a muffled and ambiguous fashion.

"Cheat! Thief! Shame of my father! Dog! Unutterable dog!"

Jullanar, alarmed, had drawn back. Ahzab, without hesitation, said: "Fear not, my heart's delight. There was a mendicant sleeping near the shop when the chest was loaded. I fear he has been inadvertently included and has woken in a state of spiritual confusion."

"A MENDICANT!" said the chest. "O liar! O mule! O son of a disease! My abode is as clean as the palace of the Khedive!"

Ahzab said, more quietly: "Also he may have had wine. We should not listen."

And then the servant girl opened the door and said: "The Walî! The Walî is coming!"

Ahzab embraced Jullanar with the speed of a man who has an exit strategy. Jullanar fainted with the exhausted efficiency of a woman who has done this before under pressure. Ahzab was through a side door and gone. The chest was still in the room when the Walî entered.

The Walî was a man of action. He looked at his unconscious daughter. He looked at the chest. He had the chest opened.

He found Es-Samit, in his best clothes, on his hands and knees, with the look of a man who has been quiet about too many things for too long and has run out of silence.

"Ahzab the Merchant!" cried the Walî. For the twins were, as their mother had often observed, impossible to tell apart. "You have come to dishonor my household! In this chest you shall leave the world! Cast him into the Nile at nightfall!"

He laughed at his own justice until he nearly fell, kicked the chest for good measure, and went to attend to his daughter.

Es-Samit, inside the sealed chest, reflected that he had been called a mendicant, confused for his brother, and condemned to drowning, all within the space of twenty minutes, and that this was a new kind of silence: the silence of a man who has nothing left to say because the situation has outpaced language.

"O Es-Samit," he said to himself, "this is the reward of the wise man."

He hit the water at midnight from a considerable height, and the Nile, which has received stranger things than a merchant in a chest, received him.

The chest was buoyant. It bobbed. It took on water slowly. Es-Samit, who had been composing his final prayers, revised them to prayers of a provisional nature. The current carried him north.

He was nearly rescued by fishermen, who heard his cry from inside the chest, began to haul the chest towards their boat, and then heard more clearly what the voice in the chest was saying, which included the name of Allah and certain additional remarks about Ahzab, and concluded that they had found a box containing a *djinn* or a particularly eloquent crocodile. They threw it back.

He was found, eventually, by four men of variable moral character on the western bank, who dragged the chest ashore and began arguing about its contents. The argument escalated through words into action, and when the action had resolved itself, three of the four men were no longer in a condition to open the chest. The fourth opened it with the expectation of treasure.

Es-Samit rose from the chest, looked at the carnage around him, looked at the sky, praised God in a voice that carried considerable feeling, and said: "There is no God but God!"

The fourth man ran. He was not heard from again.

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Now (said the hakawati, Hassan, and the room had gone entirely still in the way that a room goes still when a story is approaching its end and the audience is deciding whether the ending will be just), you will ask what became of Jullanar and of the vile and unutterable Ahzab, that shame of peacocks and disgrace of twin brothers.

Know that the Walî, in the presence of various witnesses at the moment he condemned the chest to the river, had said:

Assuredly, if thou escapest alive, thou shalt wed Jullanar.

He had said it as a joke. The kind of joke that men in power make when they believe the outcome is not in question.

Ahzab—that informed and resourceful brother, that man who had been concealed in the household quarter while Es-Samit was being thrown into the Nile—had heard this. He had considered it. He had waited a suitable interval. And then he had appeared before the Walî in the garments of a merchant, with the bearing of a man who has survived something remarkable, and said: "O Walî, I have returned from the river. I hold you to your word."

The Walî, confronted with the living form of a man he had condemned to drowning, and faced with the witnesses to his conditional pledge, and mindful of the specific social difficulty of going back on a public statement of this kind, married his daughter to Ahzab.

And Ahzab lived with Jullanar, the Pomegranate Flower, the most joyous and most agreeable and most comfortable and most pleasant life that any man in the city could describe, until they were visited by the terminator of delights and the separator of companions, which visits everyone in the end and is not particular about the justice of the distribution.

As for Es-Samit: he went home, dried his best clothes, opened his shop, and said nothing. It was, he reflected, what he did best.

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. So ends the story of Es-Samit the Silent.

The hakawati struck his staff on the platform once. The room exhaled. Someone near us started laughing and then the laughter spread in the way that laughter spreads when a room has been held in the same direction for long enough and is released all at once.

I looked at Abu Zahir. He was watching Hassan take the room's response with the quiet satisfaction of a craftsman whose work has been understood. He had the expression he wore when things were proceeding as they should.

We stayed until the café began to empty, and then we walked out through the Khan Khalili in the direction of the Husayn mosque. The market was closing—the shutters coming down, the vendors wrapping what had not sold, the last tourists consulting their phones at the corner. The minarets stood against the sky in the way they have stood for centuries, which is to say indifferently to everything happening below them.

"Hassan tells it well," I said.

"He has told it for thirty years," said Abu Zahir. "A story improves with use. The ones that are told many times become better than the ones that are told once."

I thought about this and about the stories I had been collecting for the past several years—the old Frenchman's grief on the Zamalek terrace, the silent diamond, Petraki on the Alexandria Corniche, Ferrier's wink, the shaft that would not

stay open. Whether any of them had improved with use I could not say. They had been given to me to hold, which is a different function from use.

"What happened to Es-Samit?" I asked. "After."

Abu Zahir was quiet for a moment in the way he was quiet when he had considered a question and decided on an answer. "He continued in his trade," he said. "He became known for being reliable. People came to him with things they needed to keep safe, because he was a man who understood how to keep things without speaking of them. It is not nothing, as a reputation."

We came out at the mosque and the square opened around us and the city was doing what it does in the hour before midnight, which is conducting its business with the specific energy of a place that has been doing its business at this hour for a very long time and sees no reason to stop. A vendor was selling something hot from a cart. A group of men were arguing cheerfully about something near the fountain. Two cats watched us from the top of a wall.

Abu Zahir raised two fingers in the gesture that means *until next time* and turned north, and I turned south towards the Gamaleya, and the city continued around me in all its directions at once, indifferent and inexhaustible, keeping its own counsel in the way that it always had.