

**EFFENDI**

**Arabesk 02**

**Jon Courtenay Grimwood**

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For EMC G

*from Singapore to England, via Afghanistan*

*(a hard act to follow)*

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*I saw three faces on one head. One was an angry red, another between pale and yellow, the last like those who live where the Nile rises . . .*

—Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXXIV

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## PROLOGUE

---

27th October

“Of course,” said Ashraf Bey. “We could just kill the defendant and be done with it . . .” He let his suggestion hang in the cold air. And when no one replied, Raf shrugged. “Okay,” he said. “Maybe not.”

It was getting late and autumn rain fell steadily on the darkened streets outside, while inside, sitting around their table, Raf’s visitors continued to chase the same argument in tight circles. A Grand Jury was in session. If three judges plus a senior detective in a damp, third-storey office could be called anything so imposing, which seemed doubtful.

“An accident,” suggested Raf. “The steps in this precinct are notoriously slippery. Or perhaps suicide . . . Shoelaces, an unfortunately overlooked belt . . . ? One of my people would have to be reprimanded, obviously.”

Raf looked from Graf Ernst von B, the German boy, to a sour-faced politician from New Jersey who insisted everyone call her Senator Liz, neither of whom met his eye. There was also an elderly French oil magnate, but he sat so quietly Raf mostly forgot he was there. Which was probably the man’s intention.

“Alternatively,” said Raf, “I could have him taken out to the courtyard and shot. Or, if you like, we could lose the body altogether and just pretend he never existed. One of the old Greek cisterns should take care of that.”

They didn't like this idea either; but then the young detective with the Armani wrap-rounds and drop-pearl earring hadn't expected them to . . . He was acting as *magister* to their judges. And no one as yet, least of all him, seemed very sure what that actually entailed.

“Justice,” Senator Liz said loudly, “*must be seen to be done.*” Her voice remained as irritating as when the session had begun several hours earlier.

“Lord Hewart.” Raf pulled the quote from memory. “One of the worst judges in history. And even he never suggested putting a North African trial on American television.”

“That's not . . .” Ernst von B's protest died as Raf flipped up a hand.

“Let's hear what St. Cloud thinks,” he said, and turned to the Frenchman. “Do *you* think justice needs to be televised?”

“Me?” Astolphe de St. Cloud slid a cigar case from his inside pocket. And though the iridescence of its lizardskin was beautiful, even by the light of a single hurricane lamp, what they all noticed was the enamel clasp: an eagle spreading its wings, while jagged thunderbolts fell from between the bird's sharp claws.

As if anyone there needed reminding that St. Cloud would have been Prince Imperial, if only his father had bothered to marry his mother.

“It depends,” said St. Cloud, “on what Your Excellency means by *justice* . . .” Shuffling a handful of prints, he stopped at one that showed a young girl with most of her stomach missing. “If we decide the evidence is convincing enough, then obviously the prisoner must stand trial. Like Senator Liz, my only reservation is that, perhaps, El Iskandryia is not quite . . .”

Raf caught the wry amusement in the Marquis' voice and glanced round the room, trying to see it through the eyes of a man whose own business empire was run from a Moorish palace overlooking Tunisia's Cap Bon, and who now found himself in a third-floor office, without electricity, on the corner of Boulevard Champollion and Rue Riyad Pasha, in a tatty four-square government block built around a huge courtyard in best Nationalist Revival style.

At street level the exterior walls to Iskandryia's Police HQ were faced with cheap sheets of reconstituted marble, while glass hid the exterior of the two floors above. Black glass obviously. The architect had been on loan from Moscow.

It showed.

As for the level of comfort on offer . . . A fire burned in a bucket in the centre of the floor, filled with logs from a dying carob. Apparently, the tree had been not quite alive and not yet dead for as long as even Raf's oldest detectives could remember.

Two men from uniform had hacked it off just above the roots, using fire axes. Now chunks of its carcass spat and spluttered as thin flames danced across the top of their makeshift brazier.

Directly above the brazier, suspended from the centre of the ceiling like an inverted red mushroom, hung a state-of-the-art smoke detector. Like almost everything else in Iskandryia since the EMP bomb, it no longer worked.

And behind Raf's head, a window unit that once adjusted electronically to lighting conditions had been rendered smoke friendly, also with a fire axe. Through its shattered centre came flecks of rain and a salt wind that blew in from the Eastern Harbour.

“Justice,” said Raf, “is whatever we decide . . .” His voice lost the irony, became serious. “And since the killing occurred within the jurisdiction of the Khedive, I demand that the trial take place in El Iskandryia.”

Senator Liz shook her head. “Absurd,” she said. “We have to change the location. You cannot expect us to work in these conditions . . .”

“I don't remember anyone asking you to work on this at all.” Wrap-round dark glasses were turned to the woman. The other two he'd chosen. The Senator was different, she'd practically demanded to sit on the Grand Jury.

Actually, there was no “practically” about it.

On her breath Raf could smell gin, while a none-too-subtle miasma of sweat rose from her compact body. If von Bismarck and St. Cloud could manage to bathe in cold rainwater, then so could she.

“Your Excellency,” said Ernst von B, “Senator Liz has a point. It will not be easy . . .” The young German spoke slowly, in schoolboy Arabic, supposedly out of respect for Ashraf Bey's position as *magister*, though Raf suspected his real reason was to annoy the woman, who spoke no languages other than her own.

“Nothing is ever easy. But the decision is made.” Raf stood up from his chair. And it was his chair because they were in his office. His was the name engraved on an absurdly long brass plate on the door. *His Excellency Pashazade Ashraf Bey, Colonel Ashraf al-Mansur, Chief of Detectives* .

He'd told his assistant a plastic nameplate was fine but that wasn't how things were done in El Iskandryia. The long plaque had turned up the day after Raf took the job, and once a week, on Thursdays, a Cypriot woman from maintenance came up from the ground floor to polish the sign.

“Excellency?”

Raf turned to find that St. Cloud stood next to him, leaning on a cane with a silver top.

“You *were* joking about those steps, the accidents . . . I have your word this trial will actually take place?”

Raf nodded. “You do.”

The trial would happen and it would happen soon. In all probability the defendant, one Hamzah Effendi, would be convicted. Raf just wished Hamzah wasn't father to the girl he should have married.

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## CHAPTER 1

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### 18th October

**Nine days before the Grand Jury met in an upstairs** office at Champollion Precinct, Ashraf Bey sat through a warm Iskandryian evening, bombed out of his skull, at a pavement table outside Le Trianon, drinking cappuccino and listening to DJ Avatar wreak havoc on the words of a Greek philosopher.

The afternoon call to prayer had finished echoing from the mosque on Boulevard Saad Zaghloul and the bells from l'Eglise Copte had yet to begin. If it hadn't been for a sense of dread hanging over El Iskandryia, this could have been a Monday in October like any other.

Horse-drawn calèches, their brasses shined and wheel bosses polished, rumbled up the Corniche, from the fat seawall known as the Silsileh all the way north to Fort Qaitbey, where the ancient Pharos lighthouse once stood.

And at both ends of the sweeping Corniche, at Silsileh in the shadow of Iskandryia's famous library, and at Fort Qaitbey, groups of tourists watched as fishermen set hooks or mended and untangled nets, waiting for the evening tide.

It was a tourist who'd taken the taxi that stopped outside Le Trianon, with its window down and sound system up too loud, giving Raf the chance to hear the city's favourite DJ one more time.

“And remember . . .” Avatar's voice was street raw. “Rust never sleeps. Coming at you from the wrong side of those tracks, this for the Daddy, the Don . . .”

Most of Raf's officers thought DJ Avatar came up with *SpitNoWhere* on his own; if they thought at all, which Raf considered unlikely. So they happily stamped the corridors at Police HQ, humming along, not knowing that the unchopped original went, “In a rich man's house, there's nowhere to spit but his face.”

Raf hadn't known that, at least not until recently, but the fox in his head did. And while the fox couldn't say why, the General's *aide de camp* had just delivered to Raf an engraving of hell, inscribed with the words, “*At its centre hell is not hot.*” It had at least been able to identify the picture as late Victorian, unquestionably by Gustave Doré . . .

“. . . *ou know,*” said the fox, before all this happened. “. . . *ese things, they occur.*”

The fox had a grin like the Cheshire cat, except that no cat ever owned so many teeth or carried its tail wrapped up round its shoulders like a stole. Come to that, few cats took afternoon tea at Le Trianon.

*These things* could have been Raf becoming Chief of Detectives by default, or his recent refusal to marry the daughter of a billionaire.

“Why?” Raf asked. “*Why* do they occur?”

But the fox didn't answer.

Sighing, Raf took a gulp of cold cappuccino to wash away the taste of cheap speed and fixed his gaze on the pedestrians who streamed past his café table, separated from the terrace where he sat by a silk rope and the assiduous attention of two bodyguards.

The only pedestrians to meet Raf's stare were those, mainly tourists, who didn't realize who he was. They just saw a blond young man in dark glasses, wearing an oddly old-fashioned suit, the kind with a high collar.

“Come on,” said Raf, searching inside his head. “You can tell me.”

He ignored his two guards, who looked at each other, then hurriedly looked away. Raf didn't doubt that they could see tears trickling from under his glasses, but he didn't much care either.

The fox was saying good-bye.

The beast had been dying for years. Its abilities limited by memory conflicts, failed backup and the fact that, these days, the animal could only feed on neon light.

Once Tiri had been state of the art. Feeding on daylight, infrared and ultraviolet, or so it told Raf. White light, black light—back then anything went. The fox sharpened Raf's reflexes, steadied his nerves and gave him good advice. It was what Raf had instead of parents . . .

A small ceramic box set into his skull behind one ear which kept him sane, sort of, and gave him a definable centre. And once, when Raf was very young and in another country, it had helped him walk out across a steel beam through flames and crumbling walls.

Only life wasn't simple; because the fox, of course, refused to admit that it existed. The fox's view was that Raf had a number of unresolved issues.

“Your Excellency . . . ?”

Someone hovered at his shoulder.

“Go,” said Raf and the waiter went, grateful to have been waved away.

Raf went back to watching the tourists who fed from Place Saad Zaghoul, and headed south down Rue Missala, searching for bars and theatres or just in a hurry to get back to their hotels.

After a hundred and eleven days in the city, Raf could now identify tourist groups as clearly as if they wore labels: waddling Austrians, dark-haired Frenchmen, the odd bunch of shore-leave Soviets in mufti and, rarer still, an occasional pink-skinned Englishwoman with silk scarf and sensible shoes. But mostly Iskandryia got nice couples, as befitted a famously romantic city.

The fuck-me singles, with their piercings, tattoos and trailer chic, came out only after dark, and then only in closely defined areas. Places like PeshVille, where Scandinavian kids hosed lines of coke off toilet rims, while girls shuffled, in darkened corners, on the unzipped laps of boys too blasted to know they weren't safely hiding out in student halls back home.

But that wasn't really Iskandryia, just how it went, with the limo-delivered international DJs as interchangeable as the clientele. It could have been Curitiba or Berlin, Punta del Este or Kota Baru. And anyway those clubs weren't Raf's business. The tourist police dealt with that stuff.

*“You in there?”*

Raf counted off the seconds, listening carefully for an echo inside his head. One winter night, when he was maybe ten and feeling sorry for himself, something that happened less often than Raf remembered, he'd asked the fox if he (Raf that was) had a soul . . . And the fox had gone all silent.

That was the weekend Raf refused to go to chapel. For five weeks he'd been made to run round a field in the sleet at the back of his school, while the others sang hymns in the dry. And the fox's only comment, months later, had been to point out that he should have waited until summer to lose his faith.

Maybe it was one of his schools that first put the fox in his head. Or perhaps it was his mother. Alternatively, just maybe the fox was right and it didn't exist, maybe it had never existed outside of Raf's imagination.

Raf sighed. “Do I get an answer?” he demanded. “Or do I sit talking to myself like an idiot?”

*“Your Excellency?”* It was the maitre d' this time. Raf tried to wave away the thin man but the maitre d' stayed rooted to the spot, urgency winning out over embarrassment. “The General is on the line from New York . . .” In his hand the man held an old-fashioned telephone. “He says it's very urgent.”

Raf shook his head and almost laughed as shock flooded the maitre d's face. No one refused to talk to General Saeed Koenig Pasha, not even His Excellency Ashraf Bey.

“What do I tell him?” The maitre d' begged frantically.

Raf thought about how to answer for so long that the thin man holding the telephone actually began to squirm with agitation.

“I know,” said Raf finally. “Tell him my fox is dying.”

## CHAPTER 2

---

19th October

**An early tram rattled up Rue Moharrem Bey towards** Misr Station, jinked around the silent taxi rank at Place Gumhuriya and continued west along Boulevard Sherif, passing the open front door of the al-Mansur madersa.

On the madersa's second floor, in a small room in the haremlek, a nine-year-old girl, nicknamed Hani, slept badly while a Catholic cook watched over her. The cook spoke just enough Arabic for her closest friend to be the skeletal Sudanese porter who sat, cross-legged, on worn stone steps at the front of the house talking slowly into an ancient cell phone.

“Yes, Hamzah Effendi,” he said, watching the almost empty tram go by. “I know where His Excellency is. He's still at Le Trianon.” Khartoum listened again. “Wrestling with evil djinn,” he answered and broke the connection.

Two of the tram's fares were tourists late home to bed, the other three Iskandryian, headed to work. A short-order cook, a chambermaid, a stall holder from a minor souk. Travel was cheap in the city. For most of those who worked in the service industries it needed to be.

At some hours of the day gulls could be heard everywhere across the city, but this early in the morning they circled tightly over the Shambles, rabid for any entrails that might be tossed from gutting table to harbour.

Years before, when the women with their razor-edged filleting knives had been children, or maybe it was when their mothers had been children, the Khedive had declared it illegal to discard the guts and tailings of each night's catch. Every scrap not sold had to be ploughed into the barren edges of the delta to improve the soil. Then came the first flu epidemic and with too few *felabeen* to gather in crops that lay spoiling in the existing fields, increased maize yields ceased to matter. So now the entrails went back into the water.

And when the gulls finally dispersed and first light finished staining the horizon, the sun rose out beyond Glymonopolo Bay and another

Tuesday morning began.

Shutters were opened, doors unlocked. In red-brick tenements everywhere, middle-aged women looked at potbellied men and remembered dark-eyed boys, marriage vows and lost virginity. Men mourned the slim-hipped girls they'd married and, catching sight of themselves in the mirror, wondered how they'd never noticed they'd become someone else.

And on the edge of Glymonopolo Bay, in a stuccoed villa as arrogant as any conquistador's palace, a barrel-chested industrialist turned off his phone, sighed heavily and picked up a revolver.

Again.

In front of Hamzah Effendi was a naked angel, wings spread wide and breasts full, like those of a distantly remembered mother. Except that the angel was pale and fair-haired and elegant, things untrue of anyone in his family.

She hovered within a page torn from a book, written in a language he couldn't read and inscribed on the back, "*Only here will you find peace*" and "*Apollyon.*" General Koenig Pasha had penned these in his immaculate copperplate just below a half title that read "*Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri: Paradiso.*"

With the engraving came a gun. They were the governor's answer to Hamzah's desperate plea for help.

Shooting himself would ruin his looks, Hamzah knew that. Regretted it. A long succession of twentysomething mistresses had assured him that he had the dark eyes of a hunter, the mouth of a poet and the profile of an emperor: the founder of a dynasty, not one of those weaklings that came later, slope-chinned and nervous, the kind who got strangled with a golden rope as they slept.

Hamzah's chin jutted so proudly that the eye almost slid past his heavy jowls and neck. His face had a flabbiness now that business partners seldom recalled when they thought back to meeting him; somehow imperfections got forgotten, leaving only a memory of his strength.

A gulp from his crystal tumbler later, Hamzah put down the gun.

Again.

"*Coward.*"

Alcohol tells the truth. "*I didn't mean it,*" that's the lie. People do mean it, every time. Hamzah did, even if the person at which he swore was himself. Of course, he'd have preferred to bawl out Ashraf al-Mansur but the recently appointed Chief of Detectives wasn't taking calls.

Downing another gulp of neat Laphroaig, Hamzah topped up his glass and carefully hid the bottle in the bottom drawer of a burr-walnut desk. Alcohol was illegal in Iskandryia, except for tourists and in certain bars attached to the bigger international hotels, or unless one had written permission from the General. It was a prohibition of which Hamzah heartily approved since one small sliver of his diverse interests involved supplying illegal alcohol to illegal clubs, many of which he owned anyway.

There were no early memories for him of a high-breasted, thin-hipped girl. Any more than his wife had memories of a smouldering-eyed boy who turned her body to fire. Their marriage was arranged and the only thing odd about it was that, in theory at least, Hamzah did the arranging. Rahina's useless father had owed him a debt and she was part payment.

Hamzah would have preferred the money.

He wondered, but only briefly, how well his wife would cope as a widow. Maybe her life would be improved? Money would be no problem and Villa Hamzah had never been Rahina's first choice as a home, so his guess was that she'd leave the city entirely. Either to live on a country estate in the delta or else move to Tunis or Algiers, where his disgrace might not follow her.

Hamzah ran through the checklist in his mind.

*Will*, signed and witnessed.

*Accounts*, doctored obviously; the real ones were bleached to NSA standards, overwritten and bleached again.

*Deeds to the villa.*

*Share certificates.* . . . Those were mostly for Hamzah Enterprises, the Midas Refinery, Quitrimala Industries and the offshore and Sudanese oil fields. The French and the Germans had recently offered to buy him out, but any deal could be done with his executor.

*Bank accounts*, both known and previously hidden.

*Suicide note.* Words had always given Hamzah trouble. So he'd quoted from a poem he learnt once, long ago beside a river, when he was a boy. "*I loved you so I wrote my need across the night in stars . . .*" He'd probably got half of the words wrong, but they'd expect that.

Everything was in place for what came next. Shares in Hamzah Enterprises would dip on the Bourse but bounce back. Oil prices were rocketing and the Midas Refinery would continue turning crude to cash, whoever owned it. Only in the illegal clubs, brothels and dance halls would there be a fight for succession, and that would have happened someday, whatever . . .

The revolver he held stank of oil, which was his own fault. Every gap in the previous week he'd spent cleaning and recleaning the .38, until the rifling shone metal-bright and the cylinder spun as cleanly as if the weapon was new rather than a hundred and twenty years old.

Now was the point for him to suck silence from its muzzle.

Only he couldn't.

He'd been maybe ten years old when he acquired his first gun. *Felabeen* back then didn't know their ages. Often they didn't know their families either. Some nights he'd wished he was one of them. But later he found excuses for the beatings as he tried to imagine what life must have been like for his uncle in Abu Simbel at the height of the little war, to be penniless, illiterate, with a dead wife, dead sister and a small nephew.

No, Hamzah shook his head slightly—children, responsibility, the past—those were places he wouldn't revisit. Because then he'd start thinking about . . .

*Bite on darkness.*

The revolver's handle looked odd, held upside down like that, with three of his fingers wrapped round its ivory stock and one curled tight across the trigger. All but one of the chambers were empty, because he'd only need the single bullet, the one waiting for the fall of the hammer.

*Watch the knuckles whiten.*

Every step of his life had been leading to this point. From a shack on the Nile's bank to a study panelled in pale English oak in a vast stone villa, on the edge of Glymonopolo Bay. Symmetry was what his daughter Zara would have called it. Perhaps a paradigm. She was fond of big words and bad politics.

From nothing back to nothing.

Only he couldn't do it, for reasons as ugly as the reason he had to do it in the first place. All that was left for him was to accept what came.

Hamzah yanked the taste from his mouth, spun his study chair in a half circle and blasted the head off a taut-hipped marble girl with the blank eyes of a victim and the tight buttocks of a Renaissance catamite.

Flying splinters from her crystalline hairdo ricocheted off bombproof glass in the far window and splintered English oak panelling. Alarms exploded and before the marble dust had even begun to clear Hamzah could hear running footsteps in the corridor outside.

Alex would be upset. His wife would be furious. And her French chef would be quietly disapproving. The only one Hamzah cared about was Alex. Good bodyguards were hard to find in North Africa and he was going to need one.

"Boss." The big Russian skidded to a halt, automatic already drawn and laser sight lit. A red dot danced across the walls, coming to rest when Hamzah's bodyguard realized the wrecked study was empty.

"Nothing to kill," said Hamzah. "Unless you want to slot her?" He jerked his heavy chin towards the damaged dryad and blinked as Alex blasted off first one arm, then another. Finishing with two rapid shots that took the statue off at her knees.

"Okay?"

"Yeah." Hamzah coughed. "Pretty good."

The statue was a fake, a Victorian copy of a Renaissance original, provenanced from the Russell-Coates museum in Bournemouth, which apparently was a spa somewhere in England. Hamzah had loathed the carving on sight, buying it only when he realized how much it would upset his wife. She thought all statues were an abomination in the eyes of God, never mind naked ones, and still hadn't forgiven her husband for having his portrait painted.

"You bored, Boss?" The ex-Soviet *Spetsnaz* had taken in the empty glass on the table. "You want maybe we should have some fun . . . Check out one of your clubs?"

"*What clubs?*" The small woman in the doorway glared at Hamzah's ruined statue, then at Hamzah. "You told me you'd got rid of the clubs."

Madame Rahina wore her wealth in gold bangles up both arms and in large sapphire earrings that made up in sheer worth for what they lacked in elegance. And even over the acrid dust, her cologne was heavy and obvious.

All her irritation was focused on her husband. Somewhere down life's journey from local schoolmaster's daughter to wife of a major industrialist she'd learned the essential Iskandryian art of walking into even the most crowded room and seeing only people who mattered.

Five years on, she was still smarting from the only time she'd been invited to one of the General's soirées and Koenig Pasha had chosen not to see her.

"Well?" demanded Madame Rahina. "Did you sell the clubs or not?"

Hamzah nodded. Yeah, he'd sold them all right. To himself in another guise, then leased them straight back.

"Yes, of course I did." Well, the *himself* in this case was actually a DJ called Avatar. Partly his choice of the boy was sentiment, and Hamzah knew he was sentimental (he'd yet to meet a gangster who wasn't), but mostly it was plain common sense. He'd needed to reward Avatar for an essential service the kid had performed three months earlier, one summer night near the beginning of July. When the shit was still waiting for someone to switch on the fan . . .

### CHAPTER 3

---

7th July

**At the eastern end of the city's sweeping Corniche**, where the expensive Palladian villas built from imported limestone boasted gardens that reached down to the sea, a girl swam under a warm dome of summer stars.

She was naked and out of her head on redRiff. Which was better than a few years back when her crutch of choice had been amphetamine sulphate, the pharmaceutically pure kind dished out by the sort of diet clinic that double-checked your credit rating and forgot to measure your weight.

The blond man leaving the grandest of those villas had yet to notice her because he had other things on his mind, like being wanted for murder. But he would.

Inside the villa that Ashraf al-Mansur had just left, a boy tossed silver dreadlocks out of eyes that were angry and forgot about the flick-knife he'd been using to clean his nails.

Avatar had stolen that habit from an old film, but Hamzah already knew this. Recognizing his own faults in somebody younger either made for Hamzah's losing his temper or keeping it. He was working hard to keep his.

"Zara's out there. You got that?"

Hamzah Effendi nodded.

"And you know she's, like . . ."

Hamzah said nothing but, yes, he knew. She was naked. They were discussing Hamzah's only daughter, the one who was meant to be upstairs in bed, asleep. The girl who'd recently been dumped, very publicly, by the very man Hamzah had just sent down to the beach.

"Well . . . whatever." It was Avatar's turn to shrug. Things he thought would worry the old man sometimes didn't . . . And things Av considered nothing often did. So the boy trod carefully but tried hard not to reveal the fact.

"You heard what Ashraf Bey said?" asked Hamzah, his voice hoarse with good cigars and better whisky.

Yeah, Avatar had.

"You believe him?"

The boy shrugged. How did he know who looked like a killer and who didn't . . . ? The bey was some blond-haired princeling, half Berber and half something *nasrani*; all silk suits and Armani shades. That put him way outside Avatar's frame of reference. Until Hamzah's daughter, in the early days of her "Comrade Zara" phase, had tracked Av down and dragged him off the street, he'd thought sleeping in his own bit of doorway was posh.

"Me," said Avatar, "I believe nobody."

Hamzah smiled.

Avatar had entered via a window seconds after Raf exited through the French doors, headed without knowing it towards the rocks where Zara swam, phosphorescence smoothing across her adolescent body like slipstream.

"Kamil . . ."

"DJ Avatar, Av, Avatar, 2Cool Kid," the boy corrected his father without even thinking about it. The options tossed out machine-gun fast. He didn't answer to Kamil, any more than he used the door at Villa Hamzah. This last was his present to the man who sat on the other side of the desk.

Four years back—after Avatar had kicked her—Madame Rahina, the woman who very definitely wasn't his mother, had made her husband promise never to let Avatar through the door of Villa Hamzah again.

So Hamzah hadn't.

"Av . . ." Hamzah Effendi paused and picked a cigar. Remembering just in time to use a tiny gold guillotine to circumcise its end. A life's worth of biting off the end and spitting was a habit he found hard to break. Hamzah wanted to explain to Avatar exactly why he'd sent the bey out of that door, down to where his daughter swam naked: but he couldn't put "*needs must*" into words. At least not words he found acceptable. So instead, the big man took another pull on a Partegas and thought about his lawyer waiting nervously in the hallway.

He could wait. Whatever it was Avatar had come to say wouldn't take long.

"You need money?"

Avatar grinned. Of course he needed dosh. Didn't everyone? Apart from the industrialist who sat in front of him. All the same, that wasn't why Avatar was there.

"Some journalist's been asking about you . . ."

"*Anasrani*?" It had to be. Hamzah already kept most of the local press in his pocket, and the few who were not lapping up his hospitality missed out, not from any misplaced moral backbone but because he already had them by the balls.

“English. Well, probably. You know . . .”

Hamzah knew. It was unfashionable to say so, but telling one from another was difficult until *nasranis* started flashing round their passports or local currency.

“So let me guess.” The big man smiled and let cigar smoke trickle towards the ceiling, though the smile didn’t reach his eyes and a breeze through the open window dissipated the smoke before it reached the height of a picture rail.

“Organized crime the Ottoman way?”

Avatar shook his head.

“Well it can’t be the refinery because then they’d just go through my press office . . .” His refinery was situated to the west of Isk, at the point where slums met desert. In an industry working hard to improve its image, Midas Oil was an entire lap ahead. Bursaries, research grants, third-world scholarships, a whole marine-biology, antipollution programme at Rutgers.

Accidents got apologized for the moment they happened, critics were greeted with open arms, research papers were put to peer review and released, copyright free, straight onto the Web. It was a long-term game and, as Hamzah had hoped, it was driving even the softest ecological pressure groups insane.

“What then?”

“Your childhood . . .”

To the man’s credit, Hamzah did little more than blink.

“Think you can deal with this?” Hamzah asked Avatar.

“Sure,” said Avatar. “You want him killed?”

Hamzah raised his eyebrows, amusement driving out the last echoes of anger.

“No,” he said with a smile. “I don’t want him killed. Whatever you’ve heard, whatever the police whisper, that’s not how I do things.”

Avatar looked for a brief second like he wanted to disagree. Then he shrugged. “It’s your party,” he said. And left without glancing back, exiting through a window larger than the front door of most of the places in which he’d lived.

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## CHAPTER 4

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### Sudan

#### “Safety off,” said the gun.

*Standing beside Sergeant Ka, Zac said nothing. He’d spoken little enough when he was alive and now he was dead he talked even less . . .*

*Ka thought that strange, because Zac’s sister Ruth had also said little from the time she’d been captured to the moment she died. But now she talked so much that Ka couldn’t concentrate on watching the growling trucks that rolled across the scrub towards him.*

*“Distance?”*

*“Half a klick and closing . . .”*

*Status and range. That was all the plastic H&K/cw could manage. It was an incredibly stupid weapon and the boy with the bone cross, feather amulet and boots several sizes too big didn’t know why the manufacturer had bothered.*

*There was meant to be some way to turn off the voice but to do that you needed to be able to read. So instead Ka had ripped the tail from his shirt and tied it to the stock, right over the little plastic grille behind which the speaker hid.*

*Before Ka began this mission, Colonel Abad had ordered him to be sure to check his weapons each morning. Then, when that was done, to inspect the weapons of the rest of his troop. Only there was no rest any longer. At least, Ka didn’t think so.*

*He was it.*

*So Ka inspected his own weapons, trying to remember what he was meant to be looking for . . . Dirt, maybe, and rust. Except rust wasn’t a problem because it hadn’t rained in a year in this part of wherever he was, somewhere between Bahr el-Azrek and the Atbarah. At least, that’s where he thought he was.*

*Untying the lanyard that fastened a revolver around his neck, Ka checked it. It was as clean as any weapon could be in a country where most of the earth had turned to red dust and half of that had been stripped away from the rock beneath. The revolver was his favourite. He’d have liked it even more if any of the bullets he carried in his truck had been the right calibre.*

*H&K21e clean and freshly oiled. Tripod fixed and belt ready. H&K/cw . . . spotless. His knife wasn’t clean but that was because Ezekiel’s blood had ruined the leather of its handle. Everyone had warned Ezekiel not to pick up bomblets, but the boy was six and the cluster bombs came in red, green and yellow.*

*Ezekiel had always loved bright colours.*

*Their most junior soldier had been left under a blanket of stones where he died, on the side of a hill just below the cracked eggshell memorial to where a functioning mosque once stood. Ka had refused to kill the boy until the others stopped talking to him. He was the sergeant, they said. Stuff like that was his job. In the end, Ka had given in, gone back to where he'd rested Ezekiel in the shade of a broken wall and found the small boy already dead.*

*But he buried the blade deep and carried it back to camp to show them the deed was done. Things had been different after that. They all wanted to be with Ka but he no longer wanted to be with them.*

*Now he was alone, with his back to the empty village. Well, it was two villages really. One built from grey brick that looked heavy but turned out to be solid froth, like ossified spit. That version had been constructed ten years before by the government and destroyed by them as well, a few years later.*

*The older village was behind the new one, jammed into a space between the start of a hill and a scar of rock. But most of its mud-walled huts had fallen in, from age this time. According to the Colonel, there was no water for miles, what with the wadis drying up and the nearest bore hole being both barren and filled with corpses from an earlier battle.*

*Ka lifted his H&K/cw and snapped free the lower clip. It was loaded with 5.56mm, each kinetic round dipped in holy water and polished with snakeskin. His old AK49 had been altogether better, less flashy. But an older boy had wanted Ka's AK49 and given him the plastic gun in return. That boy was dead now. Ka didn't feel too bad about it.*

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## CHAPTER 5

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7th July

“You need to be here . . .”

Avatar's call came through as Hamzah was getting ready for bed. His wife was upstairs sleeping, and his daughter . . . Wherever Zara had gone after her swim, she'd taken her little F-type Jaguar and left a wet towel on the hall floor by way of good-bye.

“Where's here?”

“Sarahz . . . Corner of Place Gumhuriya.”

Hamzah knew exactly where the club was. There might be a dozen bars and restaurants he owned without knowing exactly where they were, but Sarahz had been one of his early acquisitions, maybe the first.

“I'm about to turn in.”

“Not now, you're not . . . Believe me, I've got something you'll want to see.”

Avatar put down the club's pay phone and went back to his decks. Building on a breakbeat *sambassimba* anthem that cut the heavy overdub/techno fusion that was ol'sko drum'n'bass with lighter Sao Paolo rhythms, weirdshit polka, vicious Fender licks and syncopated snare.

“SpecialBeatService,” the near original PatifePorto mix.

He was working a late-Wednesday crowd, upstairs at Sarahz. Mostly poor little rich boys from St. Mark's plus a handful of overdressed, hard-eyed kazuals from Moharrem Bey. The girls were tourists, mostly. A smattering of au pairs, exchange students, teenagers glad to get away from their distant families.

Avatar got the gig on merit. The manager didn't know his new DJ was the bastard of Hamzah Effendi. Until ten minutes ago, Amici hadn't known that his club was owned by Avatar's father—and he was still getting over that shock.

Hamzah sighed and pushed himself up off his *bateau lit*. The mahogany bed had been imported eighty years earlier from Marseilles, found the previous year in a souk in El Gomruk and repaired for Hamzah by a sullen carpenter from Mali who spat, chain-smoked and forgot to wash but had the hands of an angel and the eye of an Italian polymath.

Hamzah forgave the carpenter his bad habits because he actually made things by hand, instead of using machines. Madame Rahina hated the *bateau lit* but that was fine. As Hamzah frequently pointed out, nothing required her to sleep in it.

Habit had made such things easy for them; and Hamzah's practice of working late justified his need for a bed in the room off his study.

Within the standards set by culture and religion, he was a good husband and he tried to be a good father. He'd never once raised his hand to his daughter and had only occasionally slapped his wife, and that not recently.

It would never occur to him to hit his mistress, but then Olga used to assassinate Americans for a living, in the days before she came to work as his PA. Olga was *Organizatsiaya* and also a Soviet spy, but she knew that Hamzah knew, and they both understood that Commissar Zukov at the Soviet Consulate now required little more than a daily report on Hamzah's movements.

Tomorrow she'd report that, after a good breakfast, he voluntarily presented himself at Champollion Precinct, the Police HQ in Rue Riyad

Pasha, to be questioned about the murder of Lady Nafisa, aunt of Ashraf Bey. She'd mention that he'd taken his lawyer and been released without charge . . . Because Hamzah would be released, that was why he kept tame lawyers.

Quite apart from the fact that, for once, he was totally innocent.

Hamzah hit a button beside his bed and waited.

"Boss?"

"I'm going out."

"Very good. I'll get the car."

It was obvious which vehicle Alex would select. Hamzah's Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost. Like Olga, Alex was Soviet and so, bizarrely, was the Rolls. At least its modifications were . . .

"If you're ready, Boss." The big man slammed shut the rear door and Hamzah felt, rather than heard, the solidness of bombproof steel and a thud as heavy locks slid into place. The car was originally built for Lenin, one of six that the revolutionary leader ordered from London when the fledgling Menshevik Alliance was at its lowest ebb.

With Cossacks advancing from the Crimea and Siberia already lost to Admiral Kolchak, Vladimir Illych had ordered his secretary's secretary to write to Charles Rolls ordering six models of his latest car, the cars to be paid for in advance, in gold. Three weeks later, the British PM reluctantly agreed to the dismemberment of the old Tsarist empire . . . Prussia, France and America followed.

Hamzah had purchased the vehicle at Commissar Zukov's suggestion during one of the CCCP's habitual bouts of bankruptcy. And had spent the first six months having various illegal listening devices taken out. Alex had come with the vehicle.

"We got trouble, Boss?"

Good question. And if he did have trouble, was it the kind that mattered? Hamzah hired people to keep trouble at arm's length but Avatar wasn't one of them. The boy was grief of a different kind.

"Let's find out," said Hamzah and leant back against black leather, remembering the boy's mother, a dark-skinned slip of a girl who spoke three languages and didn't know her own age. Hamzah did, knew it to the very month, but never admitted it, except occasionally to himself.

Rammed was how tourists described Sarahz. Rammed to the rafters, to the gills, rammed tight. The same thing happened every Wednesday, the El Anfushi clubs closed up and hard-core clubbers headed south looking for the real thing. Sarahz gave it to them. Neo retro, classic house, random darkwave . . . even trance, so epiphanic it came with a built-in halo. Chemical sainthood.

And DJ Avatar bestowed the radiance, from battered Matsui decks that had been rebuilt so many times that the only original component left was a cheap plastic logo glue-gunned to the front. Av learnt fast. His first real sound system comprised a triple deck, reconditioned 303 and original theramin. The lot got ripped off his second week playing clubs, at some cellar behind Maritime Station.

Now he had a deck that looked shit and sounded like it was wired direct to God. And when he wasn't riding his Wild Star, Avatar drove an old VW camper with one side caved in from front arch to rear fender. Prayer beads hung from the front mirror and the back window was stickered with quotations from the Holy Quran. No one looked twice. Certainly no one looked and thought, "Ah, there goes enough rare vinyl to open a shop."

Which was the point, obviously.

Sarahz had an all-night licence. The result of astute blackmail, a little bribery and the impossibly convenient fact that it was directly opposite Misr Station, with a huge taxi rank to one side and Place Gumhuriya to the front. Since the nearest apartment block was a hundred metres away and inhabited by people who really didn't matter, there were no complaints. At least none that made it onto the record books.

"D'bozzjzzere . . ."

Which Avatar quickly translated as, "The Boss is here . . ."

Nodding, Avatar killed the lights in his booth and slid a disc into one slot and a slab of samples into another and put the deck on auto. He didn't figure on being gone longer than it took to build up and break down and, to be honest, most of the floor were so caned it was doubtful they'd even notice.

"Out of here," he told his throat mike and heard an acknowledgment through his earbead. If whatever looked like taking longer than it should, Smugs would work the crowd. Smugs was a house regular, ten years older than Avatar, with half the following. Av tolerated the other guy's lack of skill and in return Smugs didn't object to Avatar claiming the decks when fancy took him.

"On the roof," said the manager as Av unlocked the booth's rear wall and stepped into a darkened corridor. All shaved skull, pearl stud and shiny black suit, Carlo Amici stood back politely and Avatar sighed. This afternoon the man had regarded Av as a lower form of life, some kid who got overpaid for pushing buttons and spouting crap. Now, suddenly, he'd discovered that Av had a direct line to Hamzah.

There went another good gig.

"I'll find my own way up," said Avatar, heading for a steel door.

“You could use the lift . . .”

“No, this is quicker.” Cooler too, more in keeping, though Avatar didn’t mention that.

The fire escape brought Avatar out on a flat roof that overlooked a darkened square. Over on the far corner of the roof, a small man was lashed to a radio aerial. The aerial was illegal but, equally obviously, no goons from RadioAuthority came by with angle grinders and chopped \$15,000 of pirate transmitter into metal spaghetti as happened in other clubs. Next to the naked journalist stood Hamzah Effendi, elegant in Homburg and camel-hair coat.

“Old man.” Avatar stepped out of the darkness.

Hamzah smiled and held out a hand. The big man’s grip was firm but controlled. What he offered was a greeting, not a test of strength.

Avatar was being publicly acknowledged in front of Alex, Carlo Amici and a couple of the doormen. Without wanting to be ungrateful, he did wonder why . . .

“Okay,” said Hamzah, “I’m here. Who’s this . . .?”

“Remember the shitweasel I was talking about . . .” The boy nodded towards the naked man. “His name’s Mike Estelle. He came in earlier, still asking questions. So I figured it might be a good idea if you two actually met. You know, socially . . .”

“You did this to him?”

“Did what?” Avatar looked at the quivering Englishman who was lashed to the mast by his testicles. There wasn’t a bruise on the man. And the only blood came from where the little shit had chewed out the inside of his own mouth.

“I barely touched him . . .”

Hamzah smiled. “You,” he said to the man. “Here I am. You want to tell me what this is about?”

A sniffing silence was Hamzah’s only answer. Sniffing silence and frightened eyes that stared back, wide and defenceless. Well, Hamzah had news for the Englishman. Defencelessness didn’t impress him and it certainly didn’t punch any buttons.

“No questions?” Hamzah sighed. “Your choice . . . Throw him off the roof,” Hamzah ordered in English, turning away.

The rising thud of a bass loop from the floor below mixed neatly with Mike Estelle’s rising scream. And apart from Alex, only Avatar saw the tiny, sideways chop of Hamzah’s hand, which negated the order.

“You hear me?” Hamzah demanded crossly. “Do it now.”

“Sure, Boss. Sorry, Boss.” Alex produced an evil-looking pair of pliers from his pocket. “Let me just snip this wire.”

Between them, Avatar and Alex freed the struggling journalist and dragged him to the edge of the roof. The fall was barely twenty feet but the ground below was concrete.

“He should be dressed,” Avatar said suddenly. “Less suspicious.”

“No,” said Alex, voice casual. “Foreign tourist gets blasted, weirds out and jumps from club roof. Check out the local newsfeed. Happens all the time . . .

“Yeah, really,” he added, seeing Avatar’s doubtful look. “Besides, no problem, the Boss will tell the police what to decide . . .” Alex began running the sobbing man backward and forward, like an athlete limbering up for some Olympic event. “Okay,” he said to Avatar. “You ready?”

That was when the *nasrani* shat himself.

Hamzah sighed. “Okay,” he said heavily. “Let’s try it a different way.” He took a fresh Partegas from his pocket and paused as both doormen bounced forward with lighters. Waving them away, Hamzah bit off one end and spat it over the edge. Only then did he nod to the one nearest.

“Last chance,” Hamzah told the journalist. “My name is Hamzah Effendi. I own the company that owns this club. I also own an oil field, the Midas processing plant and a shipping line. All this you can get from any trade directory . . . So tell me, who sent you and what do they really want to know?”

## CHAPTER 6

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### Sudan

**Sergeant Ka turned towards the truth and raised a fist above his head in formal salute:**

*I will ascend to heaven  
I will raise my throne above the stars*

I will sit on the mount of assembly . . .

*Before the silver talisman he wore around his neck became an amulet, it was briefly a bride piece in a dusty city with empty streets and a broken-down bazaar. South of the city lived the Dinka, cattle people, who once roamed the cracked earth between here and the upland forest, where fever trees glow and scrub lies lifeless, until rains come and the underbrush explodes.*

*Originally, the talisman was recognizable as a Maria Theresa dollar, but the touch of a thousand hands had worn it flat. The coin, however, was never Austrian. It was minted in Stambul, a hundred years after the empress died, at a time when silver dollars were a common currency in the Sahara, Arabia and the Sudan.*

*Having been taken south as payment for slaves, the coin became a bride price before coming north again, around the neck of a child who stabbed the grandson of the Dinka who originally received it in marriage.*

*She used a blade because that day's bullet ration was gone . . . Later, she swapped the talisman for a bone crucifix taken from a nun; but that was months later, long after the little war started in Abu Simbel. Mostly Ka avoided thinking about the little war and how he became a soldier.*

*And sometimes he forgot.*

*Before Ka was a soldier, he was a camel boy, which was an easy job and one he liked. Foreigners came by gleaming barge to the great temple and he and boys like him led them by camel up the thorny slope from the river's edge to the foot of the cliffs, where great carvings had stood undisturbed for well over three thousand years.*

*Back then, Ka wore tattered shorts and no top or shoes, because that way the tips were better. Once he'd worn a Pepsi T-shirt and a pair of Nikes that a pink-skinned girl had left behind and hardly any of the foreigners chose him. They rode with the barefooted boys.*

*He'd have learnt his lesson from this, even without the beating he got from his uncle. Next day, Ka went back to no shirt or shoes. He also began to listen to the guides when they were too busy to notice.*

*Soon he knew all the best stories about the great king and his wife. He could explain why the four big statues all wore the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt, while inside the cliffs, in the darkness of the inner chamber, the king wore only the white crown of Upper Egypt or the red crown of Lower Egypt, depending on whether he was in the northern or southern part of the temple.*

*And he learnt what interested the foreigners, those people who wasted water as if it was endless. Who washed under flowing showers, shat in unused water and giggled as they tipped full bottles over their heads and let clean water drain away into the dust.*

*He told them of kings marrying their daughters, brothers sleeping with sisters, mothers with sons. It kept the magic sacred, kept the river flowing and renewed the dark silt that lined the banks and fed the kingdom, but he didn't explain that. The reasons were never as important to the nasranias as the actions themselves.*

*When Ka told of battles where the king's army collected testicles to help his scribes count the number of captured, the men would look sick and the bareheaded women either quizzical or appalled. And Ka would smile and look happy when they tipped him, pretending to be surprised. As if he'd spend his whole morning telling them tales just because he loved foreigners.*

*No one loved the foreigners, not really. Except, maybe, the government because they brought in francs, marks and American dollars. The poor, the felahaen, would rather the foreigners didn't wander unmasked into mosques, still wearing their shoes, that they didn't choke the desert roads with coaches that threw dust into the faces of those walking and, most of all, that they didn't need endless hotels along the river, because now the areas richest in silt were closed to those who used to sharecrop them and landlords got their money from the tourists instead.*

*In one month, at the start of the little war, the army beat to death forty-eight people because they came from a distant village where the headman's son had gunned down five foreign tourists. Forty-eight for five. That was the exchange rate.*

*The son, Samir, whose name meant one whose conversation in the evening is lively, but who was never heard to say more than two words together, lived away from his father's village in a brick house on a rocky islet somewhere unimportant between Aswan and Wadi el-Sebua. He was a strange man, educated first at a local school and then at el-Azhar College in Al Qahirah. He left el-Azhar to work for the Société de Géographie d'Egypte, only to leave that in turn a few months later.*

*After his reappearance near the village, Samir adopted a family of ungainly chicken-sized birds. There was nothing very special about the birds other than the fact that they lived in a reed bed and were entirely purple, except for their stilllike legs, which were pink. They weren't even rare.*

*Before he died under torture, Samir was questioned by a major from the Al Qahirah military police. The local police were happy to do the job themselves but had been ordered to leave the job to an expert. One reason, some suggested, for their lack of action after the dead Samir's cousins ambushed the major's car, shot dead his eighteen-year-old driver and cut off the major's hands, then beat him to death.*

*By then, the disc of Samir's questioning was on its way to regional HQ at Aswan for transcription and analysis. It made no sense at all.*

*Splashing water, that came first. The clank of something, probably an empty bucket hitting a concrete floor. A slap. Another slap.*

*"I'm asking you again. When did you join the Sword of God?"*

*"Never. I'm not a member."*

*"Then why kill foreign tourists?"*

*The sound of a ragged sigh. Part pain, part exasperation.*

*"They shot the gallinule . . ."*

*"The tourists?"*

"No, the contractors. They cut down the acacia, grubbed up the tamarisk and shot my . . ."

*A thud, leather on flesh.*

"NO, WAIT." *The voice is foreign, the accent atrocious. Whoever is wielding the whip, they do what they're told. Silence follows.*

"You want me to believe you shot five tourists because contractors killed a few wading birds?"

"The river doesn't need another hotel and it doesn't need more tourists. Besides, the birds were there first."

"So you are Sword of God."

"No, I'm an ornithologist . . ."

*That was the start of the little war, which lasted a month. The big war came afterwards and went on for much longer, but Sergeant Ka never quite worked out who the government were fighting. No one important, obviously. And most of the fighting wasn't in Egypt anyway, it was in Sudan.*

*The little war, which was what his uncle called it, didn't seem so little once the tourists stopped coming to Abu Simbel and the soldiers arrived. Inside of forty-eight hours the whole of Ka's village had been rounded up and marched into the desert. Only a handful of adults survived the first week's march. Most died of heat or succumbed to the cold at night. Very few made it into the second week to reach the holding pen at El Khaschab.*

*Ka's uncle was one of those. With his wife, parents and own son already dead in another place, the man no longer believed in God, only this lack of belief was so shocking that all Ka's uncle registered was an emptiness as his midday prayers escaped between parched lips and ascended to a silent heaven.*

*Above him the same cruel sun that turned half-fertile earth to dust and killed the crops in the year Ka was born blistered his skin. A swarm of freshly hatched flies draped his shoulders like a heavy mantle but he hardly noticed them. Just as he failed to notice the watching boy or the white-plumed vultures that hopped and shuffled through the dirt, a handbreath away.*

*They are excluded by a single question. Should he shoot himself or should he shoot his nephew. With only one bullet remaining, it was impossible to do both . . .*

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## CHAPTER 7

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### 1st August

**Zara got arrested for indecency on the 28th July.** The first Hamzah knew of it was a day later, from a local paper. Front page, single column.

*Rebel Daughter Restrained.*

Since Hamzah relied on bribes, blackmail and his fearsome reputation to ensure such things never happened, never mind got reported, he was obviously furious: particularly since the shot used in *Iskandryia Today* showed his daughter crop-haired and naked under a tight coat.

It would be fair to say that he was also troubled. The police were paid handsomely to leave anything that might connect to Zara or her friends well alone.

So far as Hamzah was concerned, *leaving alone* meant not arresting his daughter at some illegal/political dance club. And if the Club de Hashishan really was hers, and the police were probably right about that, then that was even more reason for letting things be.

Unfortunately, the offending picture of Zara turned up again, slightly larger in *Iskandryia on Sunday*. This was the paper that his daughter had just tossed in the bin, before stamping out of his marble-and-red sandstone office . . .

"Well," said Olga Kaminsky, "you deserved that." Hamzah saw her smile as she removed Zara's cup from his desk and wipe away icing sugar with one easy sweep of a linen napkin.

Stating the obvious to Hamzah was living dangerously, but he paid Olga to tell him the truth and so Olga did. Besides, he was too shocked to fire her. Which he did about once a month, only to say nothing when she turned up the following day, as if their fight had never taken place.

Another PA might have convinced herself that this was because he prized her opinion, that the unusual leeway he gave her had nothing to do with those half dozen occasions each year when he took her to bed, but he knew Olga lied neither to him nor to herself. All the same, their relationship wasn't based on anything as simple as sex.

It was her lack of avarice that first captured his imagination. Other mistresses had taken the diamond chains he offered, the Cartier watches, the inevitable mink. Olga took nothing but her salary and returned every gift, opened but unused. She seemed to want nothing from him but his company and, occasionally, his presence in her bed. And it was *her* bed, a single one with metal frame, because she'd refused his offer of a flat as well.

"Olga, where did I go wrong?" Hamzah's grin was rueful but admiring. There couldn't be another daughter in Iskandryia who'd stamp unannounced into her father's HQ, spin on the spot and slip off her jacket to show her naked back, lash marks and all, when asked why she refused to come home.

But then, daughter and mother had never been close. And it hadn't helped that Rahina's only advice to Zara before her abortive engagement to Ashraf Bey was, "Never undress in front of your husband."

If Hamzah could have stopped the whippings, he would have done so years back; but mothers dealt with daughters and fathers with sons. And his boast that he'd never lifted his hand to Zara lost out to the fact he'd never actually raised his voice to protect her either. Tradition strangled him, Hamzah knew that. Under the silk shirt and Gucci suit he was still a *felabeen* at heart.

Zara, however, was not a *felabeen* daughter. Proper schools, two years in New York and a career at the Bibliotheka Iskandryia had seen to that. She was brave, beautiful and smitten with Ashraf Bey, although Hamzah was prepared to bet almost anything she hadn't let Raf know that.

He understood what drove his daughter. What was even weirder, he actually admired her while knowing full well it was meant to be the other way round.

"Olga, I've got a problem . . ."

Her laugh was instinctive. "You've got lots of—" Then she stopped. "You mean you've got a problem I don't know about?" Olga paused in the doorway, then quietly came back to where Hamzah sat. She didn't perch on the edge of his desk or casually grab a chair and straddle it. She waited for Hamzah to nod towards a leather sofa. And when she sat it was elegantly, with her stockings legs crossed at the ankle.

Hamzah wondered what Olga saw when she looked at him. A filthy capitalist? A self-deluded gangster? A parvenu so desperate for baubles he bought his own title? Or a father unable to safeguard a daughter who refused all protection?

"Okay," said Olga briskly. "Problems I do know about . . . Your daughter's been busted by the *morales* for running an illegal club. She's in love with some spoilt little princeling who doesn't know his arse from his elbow. There are rumours of a strike at the refinery. And, despite a full and frank talk, someone's still asking around about your childhood, according to Kamil . . ."

"Avatar," Hamzah corrected, without even thinking about it. "He calls himself DJ Avatar."

"Whatever. He could still become a problem . . ."

"No," said Hamzah. "Ashraf Bey's a problem. Avatar just wishes he was."

"You believe the bey's for real?"

"I know he is," Hamzah said heavily. "And he's a trained killer, government issue . . . A bit damaged round the edges but still under guarantee." The big man laughed. "Well, that was how he described himself."

"And you actually *wanted* this man to marry your daughter?"

"I *want*," Hamzah corrected her. "More than want, I *need* this man to marry Zara."

"I see," said Olga. "Can I ask why?"

Hamzah shook his head. There were, in his experience, immutable laws about how fathers felt regarding the suitors who sent flowers and elegant cards to their daughters. The first feeling of hatred gave way to one of regret. Third, and finally, came loss as the daughter became a woman. So was it written.

Laws, equally immutable, governed the behaviour, if not the actual feelings, of those courted. Whoever came calling, daughters pretended to despise them. Presents were returned unopened, letters sent back unread. Mashrabiya shutters were slammed tight against each and every serenade. No touch was sought or permitted.

Yet Hamzah knew beyond doubt that his own daughter had spent a night with this man. And while he should have been furious, he was merely worried and oddly sad. It was hard to know if his tenderness for Zara and her willingness to turn to him was a sign of success or proof of failure.

And beyond these things he barely ever thought about, like his own feelings, was a real threat to his wealth, his happiness and to his own and Zara's lives. Because when Iskandryian newsfeeds began running stories they shouldn't and the police stopped contacting him at the first sign of trouble then the threat was real.

Someone somewhere reckoned they could change the balance of power.

"Look," said Hamzah, relenting slightly. "At its most basic, I need Ashraf to marry Zara to give her protection . . . Protection I may not be able to provide for much longer. And if she doesn't marry the bey, I have to find someone else. The big problem is that I may not have time."

Behind her heavy spectacles, Olga's blue eyes were large. She understood exactly what he was saying. If Hamzah could no longer protect his daughter, then he couldn't protect her either. If he couldn't protect her, then what hope had he of protecting the refinery, Hamzah Enterprises or any other of the myriad shells within shells making up the story that justified the last thirty years of his life . . .

"Have you upset the General?"

"No." Hamzah shook his head. He and Koenig Pasha had a better understanding than most people realized. All the General required of Hamzah was that he recognize who was in charge of El Iskandryia, which wasn't the young Khedive and wasn't him. In return, the General kept Interpol at bay, played Washington's investigators off against those from Moscow, and shamelessly ignored or flattered Paris.

"Tell me," said Hamzah, "is there such a thing as a normal childhood?"

“No,” Olga replied immediately.

“Then, even allowing for the fact no one has a normal childhood,” said Hamzah, “mine was different.”

Standing up from his desk, he walked to a window, leant out and watched a sweeper in the playground of St. Mark’s College. The fact that Hamzah’s marble-and-red sandstone office was built next door to the college was not an accident.

He’d worked the kitchens at St. Mark’s, long ago, when he first arrived in the city. The name *Hamzah* came from a faded board listing every pupil killed in the war of 1914–15. The *Qutrimala* that became his surname was borrowed from the gilded spine of a book in the library.

He wasn’t meant to leave the kitchens but no one saw a young boy in a jellaba with a split broom in one hand and a dustpan in the other. To the pupils and masters of St. Mark’s, Hamzah was so invisible that he might as well have been made from glass.

No one would ever look through Zara.

“Follow her,” Hamzah demanded.

“Me?” Olga sounded surprised.

The thickset man briefly considered that option. There were advantages but the disadvantages were greater. “No,” he said, “get someone from security. Have them report back every five minutes.”

At noon Hamzah received a report that Zara had been admitted to the General’s house and had seen not the General but the young Khedive himself. Two hours later she was shopping for children’s clothes accompanied by a small girl, described as anxious and scrawny. The child had just demanded a haircut, one enough like Zara’s own for them to be taken for sisters.

At six, both Zara and Raf’s niece Hani were being driven aimlessly back and forth along the Corniche in a calèche, one of those open-top, horse-drawn carriages loved by tourists. Shortly after that, they disappeared through the door of a warehouse at the back of an old market near Rue Tatwig.

A quick and dirty skim through the land registry revealed that it was owned by a holding company. An even dirtier skim anchored the ownership to Madame Sosostriis, a known agent of the *Thiergarten*, Berlin’s infamous intelligence service. An organization with whom Koenig Pasha was believed to have close, if occasionally fractious, links.

But it was only when Zara was joined by Lady Jalila, wife of the Chief of Police, aunt to Hani and cousin to a woman Ashraf Bey was rumoured to have murdered, that Hamzah began to get really worried.

## CHAPTER 8

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### Sudan

#### “Don’t be ridiculous.”

*“I’m not.”*

*“Yes, you are . . .”*

*It was Zac who came up with the idea of turning off the river, a few days after antiquated F-111s bombed Mason Hospital with his brother inside.*

*Ka had found a small radio and a pair of spectacles. The radio was one of those old, windup things made of blue plastic. Like the spectacles, its case was cracked, and the dial didn’t work too well, but it still got Radio Freedom, which was the government, and Radio Liberty, which wasn’t . . .*

*An old woman was talking about war. She sounded cross and upset. Close to tears. She didn’t think the hospital had been an arms depot at all, she thought it was a hospital.*

*Did she have any proof she was right?*

*Did anyone have any proof that she wasn’t?*

*How long did Madame Ambassador think the war would go on? The woman asking all the questions was younger, her voice brittle.*

*“As long as there’s water to be fought over,” replied the old woman tiredly. “As long as . . .”*

*“. . . the Nile flows,” Zac repeated, for about the fifth time. “That’s what she said.”*

*“Rivers aren’t taps,” said Sarah, flicking long black braids out of her eyes. Being reasonably open to new ideas, Sarah wasn’t contemptuous like Saul, just doubtful. She looked across their small campfire to where the sergeant sat, and casually asked Ka what they were all wondering . . .*

*“What do you think?”*

*It was Ka’s job to know.*

*“Well”—Ka poked at the embers with a stick, sending sparks flicking skywards—“rivers get bigger, right, Saul?” That was what he remembered being told.*

*Saul shrugged. He was older than Ka and bigger, only not as clever. And Saul wasn't his real name any more than Sarah was Sarah or Bec was actually Rebecca. But they'd fought with Ras Michael and those were their given names. The shoulder patches might have changed after they swapped sides at Aswan, yet the biblicals had stuck. Mostly because they'd been with Ras Michael for so long their original names were lost.*

*“Gets bigger? Says who?” Bec's voice sounded aggressive but then it always sounded aggressive. Hers was still a real question.*

*“I do,” said Ka, more confidently. “Rivers start as streams and then get bigger on the way down the mountain. So they must begin small.”*

*“What mountain?” Zac asked.*

*“There's always a mountain,” Ka said. “Or a hill. So if we find the start we can block it . . .”*

*“And just how do we do that?” Bec demanded.*

*It was Zachary who answered. “With ash,” he said, then blushed. “You build the dam with stones, put twigs behind it and then throw ash in the water. That blocks the small holes.”*

*“Okay,” Saul said heavily. “Suppose we decide to turn off the Nile . . .” His tone made it obvious how stupid he found that suggestion. “How do you suggest we get to where it starts?”*

*“Follow it,” said Sarah, as if that was blindingly obvious.*

*“Rivers wiggle,” Zac protested.*

*Sarah looked at Zac, trying not to be cross with the small boy. “Then we'll just have to follow the wiggles, won't we?”*

*“Not necessarily,” said Ka, then stopped. Only he'd said too much already. And Sarah was looking at him, openly interested.*

*Reaching into his shirt pocket, Ka pulled out the dark glasses. They were warm beneath his fingers. From the moment he'd found them, day or night, whatever the temperature in the desert they were always slightly warm. As if their temperature was controlled by a tiny spider's web of gold threads that ran beneath the surface of the frame.*

*“Wow,” said Saul. “He's got shades.”*

*Ka kept his temper.*

*“Where am I?”*

*“What . . . ?”*

*Flipping up one hand, Ka cut dead Sarah's question. He could still see the others but now the fire had become a white blaze. A split second later, the flames fell into focus and it was the others who backed into shadow. And then in front of Ka's eyes, the picture changed. Maybe it altered inside his head or maybe the new picture happened on the lenses. It was hard to tell.*

*All Ka knew was that suddenly he looked down at himself. A boy with too-big boots sitting at a crude fire beside a girl in a vest and combats. Opposite sat another heavier girl, a small boy hugging a gun, and a large boy who was clearly the eldest but whose poorly mended arm put him at an obvious disadvantage.*

*Around them were dotted other fires, other groups. Ka was slightly shocked at just how many fires there were. Further away began real tents, where the real soldiers slept, their campfires fuelled by gas, not scrub or camel dung. Beyond this, a slope began and at the bottom was a wide river. And though the water level was low, fat hippopotami still hung heavy near the muddy banks, ignoring the jackals that slunk out of the darkness to drink.*

*Black birds with white crowns roosted in the ruin of an old tomb, its broken walls split apart so long ago that it looked like a natural formation, an outcrop of crumbling mud brick.*

*Lions were meant to sneak down from the highlands, ridden by white-whiskered monkeys who spoke a real language and lived high on a cliff face, secure from humans. Ka could see neither of these.*

*Though he could see movement, away to his right, human movement where dry wadis fed from mountains that ran along the distant coast like a spine. Beyond this, a thin strip of towns and small cities separated the spine from more water than Ka could imagine.*

## **RED SEA.**

*The letters lit across his vision, but he didn't need to read them because the name was spoken softly into his ears. Which was as well because Ka hadn't been taught reading, though he could remember anything if he knew it was important. And sometimes he remembered things anyway, just in case they turned out to be useful later.*

*So he knew, without being told, that the white markings on the bonnets of the 4 × 4s racing down the dried oueds towards their camp belonged to the government.*

*They left their fire banked up and burning brightly. Their rucksacks made a huddle under Saul's old blanket. At ground level it looked like they were still there and sleeping.*

*Ka led them through the early morning, heading west. Pickets were stationed at regular spots around the camp, but those on guard duty sat talking or smoking kif, which they hid in their hands so that ends stayed hidden from the grown-ups. Who, if they were wise, stayed away. Two nights back a ten-year-old picket had fragged a one-bar, ostensibly for refusing to give the password. Word was, she'd tried to confiscate his cache.*

*"This way." Ka slid down a gravel bank to where silver water spread away into forever. Reality was less far than it looked, but far enough. Now was where he learnt if he actually had control over the group or not.*

*"We have to cross the river," said Ka, his voice calm. As if asking them to brave the water was a perfectly reasonable request. For a second, he wondered whether to mention the armed trucks racing across the desert on the other side of the camp, each one filled with a dozen heavily armed soldiers.*

*Saul might want to stay to fight and Ka could live with that. It mattered very little to him what Saul did, or where. But Sarah might stay too, and that mattered much more. Bec, as ever, would do what was the least effort.*

*"What about crocodiles?" Zac asked.*

*"There aren't any," Ka said firmly.*

*"How do you know?"*

*"I just do."*

*Obviously enough he was lying, because he could see at least three. Loglike flickers that grew brighter the harder he looked. Crocodilus niloticus, according to the glasses, five hundred paces away. With luck, the reptiles would remain asleep. Without luck. . . Well, that applied to everything.*

*"Come on," insisted Ka. "Move it. And hold your weapon over your head so water doesn't go down the barrel."*

*"I can't move it," said Saul quietly. Sounding, for once, less than certain.*

*"Why not?"*

*"Because I can't swim."*

*"Oh . . ." Ka hadn't thought of that. "Anybody else?"*

*"I probably can," Zac said brightly. He paused, suddenly aware that Ka, Sarah and Bec were staring at him. "I mean I've never tried but . . ."*

*Bec sucked at her teeth, crossly.*

*"Sarah?"*

*She was the only one Ka was really bothered about.*

*"Of course I can swim. My father was a fisherman."*

*"So?" His father had kept camels and Ka hated the animals and they hated him. He never rode when there was an option to walk.*

*"So I can swim," said Sarah. "Okay?"*

*"Well, I can't." Saul's voice was getting angry.*

*The picture shifted and tightened, an overlay of wavy lines hanging ghost-breath in front of Ka's eyes. Some spoke of height, being set tight to the edges of scars and cliffs. Others mapped the river. It took Ka a while to realize that these indicated depth, but that was because his attention was on something else.*

*Sarah volunteered to get the boat.*

*"Turn your backs," she demanded, waiting until they had. Beneath her vest and combats she wore nothing except a ragged thong cut high at the hip. A Norwegian nurse had given the thong away, along with the rest of her spare clothes the day before returning to a family farm outside Namsos. The new owner died of a gut shot. Sarah had swapped the thong for a half packet of Cleopatra and an amulet from the person who owned it after that.*

*"Be back soon . . ."*

*Ka heard the slight splash, as they all did: but he was the only one able to watch as Sarah struck out across the dark expanse of water, head bobbing and legs kicking to the side. Except it wasn't her head he watched but her back and buttocks, flesh thinned by hunger and endless marches that trailed the Ragged Army up and down the river.*

*Fifteen minutes later, Sarah was on her way back, puffing slightly but happy. Although what the others saw was a boat that glided towards them as if by magic.*

*"Turn round," she demanded, scrambling up the bank and into her dusty clothes, ignoring the water that ran down her legs and between her small breasts.*

*"What's with you?" Saul demanded.*

*Ka jumped.*

*"You're standing weird . . ."*

"I was listening," Ka said hastily and regretted it the moment Saul asked him the obvious question.

"To trucks," said Ka.

Which got their attention. Zac went fly-catcher, mouth hanging open, Bec looked round and even Sarah shot him a sideways glance as she squeezed water from heavy black braids. That was when Ka remembered he wasn't going to mention the government.

"Blue bats?" Saul's voice was raw.

"No idea," said Ka, although he had. There were blue bats, militia and regular government troops. Plus two open trucks full of nasrani wearing black uniforms and swirling face paint. "But I don't plan to hang round to find out."

"You just going to run away then?"

Ka stepped back. "Which is more important?" he asked Saul. "Staying here or going to turn off the Nile?"

"We can do that later," Saul protested.

"What if we're dead?" Ka said. "Who'll go then?"

The deck of the tiny felucca had been bleached white from a lifetime's sun, the sky sail was rotten and the sycamore sides were warped. Cracks above the waterline had been ignored but any gaps below were stuffed with rope and crudely gummed over, both inside and out, with dollops of bitumen.

"It looks great," Ka told Sarah.

Together they launched her boat, then stood back, up to their hips in the wide river as Zac pulled himself up over the side. Bec followed, booking her dress above wide hips to keep it out of the water. Ka guessed she knew she wasn't wearing any pants.

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## CHAPTER 9

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### 7th October

The earlier collective gasps of a city in orgasm were silent, although the crunch of exploding fireworks still tripped car sirens, providing a counterpoint to the dogs that found themselves tethered for the evening.

October 7 was *Ashura*, tenth day of Muhram and the date of El Iskandryia's biggest fireworks display. A night when rockets rose so often from parties along the Corniche that they ceased to attract the eye; and only the grandest waterfalls of silver sparks raised even slight interest. At midnight, having fasted for two days, the city turned its attention to feasting.

Cafés spilled out onto pavements, restaurants were overbooked months in advance and only money or influence could get you a late table.

Heading west on Boul Isk, a dining car swayed over rails beaten silver with use and water slopped from a carafe. In a kitchen so small that the evening's menu was limited to only five dishes, a sous chef dropped his steamer of asparagus . . .

But all of that was only background. Maxim's was still the only place to dine at the end of *Ashura*. A single restaurant car with, bizarrely enough, its own liquor licence; crowded out with people who mattered. Which, in Zara bint-Hamzah's considered opinion, meant monied and stuck up, as opposed to her dad, who was just obscenely rich.

As of that morning, Zara's hair was blue, almost purple; cut extra short, like a stevedore's, in solidarity with the dock strike in Tunis. Needless to say, the razor cut cost more than any stevedore earned in a week.

It did, however, suit her, now that a month of dieting had given Zara back her cheekbones. And she understood the absurdity of her unstinting support for lost causes. Zara shrugged, then sighed, then shrugged again.

The final shrug was to annoy her mother.

Zara was dressed head to toe in a very grown-up *Atelier Azgedine* creation that revealed almost no flesh while clinging tightly to every curve. The gown had been worked up from a single sketch, then cut and corrected on the body of an appropriate house model. A notoriously slow and expensive way to work.

The honeymoon might not have happened, but Zara still appreciated her father letting her keep his present. Another of his surprises, altogether more unexpected, sat in her Gucci bag. The new Amex was not a top-up job, like the one that held her six-monthly allowance, nor a secondary card drawn against one of her father's banks. This was different, tied blind into a megainternet account in Zurich. Just how mega only made sense once Zara had called Switzerland, read off the account number and had someone tell her just how many dollars sat with the gnomes.

So she was both beautifully dressed and absolutely terrified. Because what her father had promised her, right after she nearly got murdered that evening in the warehouse, was her own flat . . . So she no longer had to live at Villa Hamzah.

Instead, he'd kept her at home and given her a one-off, nine-digit payment in US dollars, made to an account in a city where women having capital was obviously not against the law.

And for Zara, the real problem was not that her father had given her so much money, not even that he'd obviously changed his mind about letting her live alone, it was that she could no longer get close enough to him to find out why.

*Later, was all he could say, when things are sorted out .*

Taking a single caper from a nearby bowl, Zara sucked out the salt and reduced the flower bud to pulp with her tongue. She was reaching for another when a waiter materialized at her shoulder.

“Champagne?”

“Please.” Zara smiled and held up her glass, making someone at a table across the aisle snort with contempt. At the sight of a woman drinking, at the fact she’d lifted her own glass or just because she’d smiled at a waiter? It was hard to know and Zara told herself she didn’t care. So she kept the smile in place and waited until her glass was full, then carefully thanked the man.

There was a Starbucks in New York at the intersection of Morningside and West 123rd, catercorner to Central, where Zara had wasted every weekday evening for nine months waiting tables for basic plus tips rather than call home and admit the allowance she’d asked for wasn’t enough to cover living in Manhattan, not even in a fifth-floor walkup. The day she started being rude to waiters was the day she would shoot herself.

Still smiling, Zara looked across at the other table and raised her glass . . .

Millions had gone on Maxim’s last refurbishment. Designers from Prague and Dublin had specified chairs that were, apparently, Arts and Crafts, ergonomically corrected to reflect modern requirements of comfort. The floor was smoked glass and the walls pale Burmese silk, taken from lava genetically fixed to excrete gossamer-thin strands of gold. Every painting was original, expertly provenanced. Mostly they were a mix of sombre Klee and Matisse, with the occasional August Macke. All this was the stuff of travel features.

What wasn’t common knowledge was that a substantial proportion of the refurbishment costs went on bombproofing the restaurant car to US Army standards. Hamzah Effendi, however, knew the security specification exactly. Safety Unlimited was a subdivision of Martini & Gattling, now a wholly owned subsidiary of Quitrimala Enterprises.

Around the restaurant, interchangeable notables picked at roast turbot marinated in lime on a bed of cucumber, or prodded sautéed duck liver with fenugreek and Thai chilli. Maxim’s was resolutely uncompromising in its allegiance to traditional fusion.

Personally, Hamzah would rather have been at home eating eggs fried with halumi but, as well as being *Ashura*, tonight was to celebrate Zara’s escape from the clutches of a rogue *Thiergarten* assassin. That had been the idea anyway.

Only Zara sat gazing listlessly out of a window, Rahina was furious about something and their guest, a major who’d practically invited himself, was halfway through a boring description of the luxuries to be found aboard a liner called the *SSJannab* .

“Do pay attention.”

Hamzah opened his eyes but Zara was the one being scolded. Somehow his wife’s voice got the attention of everybody in the restaurant except her daughter.

*“Zara, please pay attention.”*

“To what exactly?” She smiled coldly at her mother.

“To what the major is telling you, darling.” The endearment was at odds with the anger in the dumpy woman’s dark eyes.

“And what is the major telling me?” Zara asked, sweetly. She batted her eyelids at the man, who looked away, finally embarrassed. Quite at which of the many embarrassments on offer it was hard to say.

“Well?” Zara asked. When the major pretended not to hear her question, Zara went back to watching the shops go past.

According to the *Guide Michelin*, two Parisian chefs were first responsible for the idea of converting the tram into a moving restaurant. Where other entrepreneurs might have tried to cram in tables, they’d bought two wooden tramcars, linked them together and used the front car as a restaurant and the rear as offices and a kitchen. That had been 120 years before and, with only eight tables ever available, Maxim’s had been booked solid for months ahead ever since.

“Just how did you get a reservation?” Zara asked suddenly.

The next table stopped talking. Maybe they were interested or maybe she’d just interrupted their idiot conversation; Zara didn’t know and really didn’t care.

“I mean,” she said bitterly, “you couldn’t know I was going to be *rescued* by Ashraf Bey, could you? And it wasn’t like you knew he was going to turn out innocent.”

“I never believed that Raf . . .” began Madame Rahina.

Zara snorted.

Ignoring the look of outrage on her mother’s face, Zara turned to her father. “The table,” she reminded him, just in case he’d forgotten.

“I never,” repeated her mother loudly, “I never . . .” But she didn’t get to finish that sentence either.

“You did,” said Zara. “You told me execution was too good for him and that you knew, just as soon as you saw him, that he was an evil . . .”

"I got a list of everyone who had a table booked," said Hamzah flatly, his voice cutting through the blossoming quarrel. Zara bet he pulled that trick at business meetings, not that he'd need to do it often. Most people he met owed him their living. "Then I called them up in turn and made one of them an offer."

"Which one?" The major's French carried a Cairene intonation that went with his hawklike nose and high cheekbones. His skin was as honeyed as her own was dark, and skilful tailoring on his dress uniform showed off his elegant figure. Zara reckoned she might even like him, if only he'd lighten up a bit.

"I mean," he said, "how did you choose?"

Hamzah laughed. "Oh, that was easy. I told each one that I had every intention of eating here tonight and offered a token sum for his table to the one who sounded most horrified."

Despite herself, Zara smiled, though it was obvious that the major was startled by the joke Hamzah made against himself. Which begged a big question, why was he really here? When she'd first walked into Maxim's and seen his name on a place card, Zara was sure he'd be her new suitor. Some wellborn, near-bankrupt staff officer her mother had found to make her respectable . . . As if anything could make her respectable in Iskandryia's eyes after Raf had publicly jilted her.

Her father's money in return for social cachet. Class for cash, that was the deal Raf was offered. And it almost worked. Would have done in fact, if Raf's now-dead aunt and her own decidedly undead mother had had anything to do with it. Only thing was, Raf had other ideas.

"Well," said Zara, "you got the table. So when do we actually get to eat?"

"There's plenty of time," Hamzah said calmly.

"Really?" Zara looked at her watch. "Maybe my Rotary's fast." She tapped the side, shrugged and went back to staring out of the tram. So what if she was behaving badly? She'd said the meal was a bad idea when he first suggested it and repeated herself when her father announced he'd booked a table. Nothing had happened since to make her change her mind.

The ornate offices of Thomas Cook and the Olympia building slid past, Café Athinios and the stuccoed Palais de Justice following after. Place Zaghoul let her look out over a dusty square to the dark sea beyond, until the view was cut off by a bus station. They were still headed west, one block back from the Corniche.

Coming next was the tomb of the unknown warrior, where tramps slept against marble walls, tattered booths sold sticky almonds and foreign tourists walked hand in hand, seeing only beauty. Beyond that, the Corniche curved north towards the brooding weight of Fort Qaitbey.

Another road would herd the tram along the top of the promontory to Ras el-Tin, then steer south towards Maritime Station and the start of the old dockyards.

Seen on a map, the jutting promontory looked like a fat apple core. But the district's rocklike solidity was an illusion. Once, the area had been mostly underwater. Then a causeway joined an island to the shore. Eventually the causeway had been thickened, then thickened again with rubble until finally El Anfushi was created, with its narrow streets and weird, inward-looking Turko-Arabic houses. Houses that must be . . .

"Why couldn't you just invite Hani by herself?" Zara demanded suddenly. Hani might be nine but she could still date a building just by looking at it.

"Well?" Zara asked crossly.

"Perhaps she was the one who didn't want to come." Madame Rahina's words were brittle. Her anger at Raf's snub not quite offset by the pleasure she got from blaming Zara.

"You asked her?"

"No, of course I didn't *ask* her. You don't *ask* children. She was included on the invitation to Ashraf Bey."

*Terrific.* Zara's glance slid to the empty chairs. Place names still showed who should have sat in them, though the maître d' had insisted on whisking away the table silver when he realized that Hamzah's missing guests were likely to remain that way.

"You didn't really expect him, did you?" Hamzah asked his daughter gently. There was no anger in his voice, no accusation. Just the acceptance of basic facts. Chief among them was that the last time Ashraf drove out to Villa Hamzah, she'd flatly refused to see him. Actually, Raf hadn't driven himself at all, Avatar was the one behind the wheel and she'd been cross about that too.

Expect him? She expected nothing.

That Av was missing was a given, Zara knew that. Her father only ever saw the kid if he knew her mother was busy elsewhere. And even that was a recent development, poor little bastard. Which was what Av was. In a city where polygamy was normal, to be illegitimate was by definition to be poor, one of the unwanted.

"Here," said the major as he handed her a linen napkin, spotless and uncreased, "you might want this . . ."

Zara looked at him blankly.

"You're crying," he said.

She was too, which might explain the soft edges to the streets outside.

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## CHAPTER 10

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7th October

**The girl at the window was unmistakable as the restaurant car trundled by.** Her desolation so real that Raf could almost taste it through glass.

Been there, felt that.

He wore dark glasses from habit, a leather coat lined with spider's silk and boots with toe caps and black metal heels. Behind the Armani shades his eyes had four colour receptors, as they had done from birth, one more than strictly human. His fourth was in ultraviolet, though he could recalibrate across the entire spectrum.

Sound he adjusted by opening and closing his inner ear. So far, so predictable, if somewhat simplified. Unpredictability started with the fox, which now spat static, swore and raged inside his head.

The police bike on which Raf sat came with twin headlamps, featuring the very latest in multielement cluster/light guide technology, but he'd disconnected them at the same time as he cut the wires to the brake light and both sets of indicators. The reflectors he'd ripped off by hand. Matte black alloys went with a racer-noir engine cage and a light-swallowing paint job. The whole bike was gloriously transparent to CCTV.

The paint job was fresh and done by a garage at cost. A lot of people in the city suddenly wanted to be friends with the new Chief of Detectives. As it was, Raf practically had to order his local store to start charging full price for groceries and only the threat of taking his business elsewhere had convinced the manager Raf was serious . . .

*"You certain some fuckwit intends to snatch her?"*

Raf wasn't sure whether to nod or cry, so he nodded. The fox might be back but it had rebooted to a default personality. And Raf had always thought the fox was the stable one while he suffered the glitches.

*"Says who?"* demanded the fox.

Said every snitch on the precinct's payroll, every cut-rate whore trying to cop a plea, even a few semihonest members of the public too afraid to leave their names. Rumour had hit the streets on steroids and been breaking lap records ever since.

The *why* changed with every telling, but the *what* was rock-solid, whispered from under veils and escaping like smoke in the cafés from between half-open lips; somehow, and it was a very indeterminate somehow, tables had been turned on Hamzah, the man himself had been made the proverbial offer that can't be . . . only he had, and as of now, Hamzah's kid was a walking target. Everybody but everybody who was anybody, who knew that kind of thing, already knew it. Hamzah included.

*"Daddy's rich?"*

"Come on," Raf muttered crossly.

For a while the fox said little, so Raf went back to worrying about Hani, because some days that felt like what he did best.

Just before leaving home, Raf had asked the kid if there was anything she needed, meaning toast or hot chocolate before bed, and she'd looked at him, her arms like sticks and small face serious, flicked her dark fringe from darker eyes and said, *"more time."*

So that was what he was trying to give her. Time and space. Life's great shortage for those who already had the luxury of water and food. Since the incident at the warehouse, Zara hated him, fair enough. Raf could live with that, but Hani's mistrust really hurt. He saw it in her every silence, her refusal to eat when he was in the madersa's huge kitchen, in sideways glances and half-conscious flickers of fear.

Most of the time Raf managed to convince himself that it was just his imagination. And then he'd come home to some unguarded look or catch a muttered reassurance from Donna to Hani, as the kid was sent to kiss him good night before trundling off to bed.

*Puddles*, Hamzah had said, surprising Raf, the one time they talked. Adults might labour upstream against their grief but children step in and out of sadness, trailing it after them in damp footprints. Only to step back into misery when the ground behind them begins to look dry.

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## CHAPTER 11

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7th October

**"I'm fine," Zara insisted.**

"No, you're not." There was a determined expression on her mother's face. "Major Halim's absolutely right. What you need is some air." Madame Rahina glanced at her husband for support but Hamzah was staring pointedly into the bottom of a brandy glass.

One of the advantages of dinner at Maxim's was that it held an international drinks licence. Alcohol might be frowned upon, but it was not illegal.

“Air,” said Madame Rahina. “A good idea . . . Don’t you agree, my love?”

Hamzah pretended to wake with a start. He knew exactly what was going on and had done from the moment his wife first mentioned inviting the major, but he trusted his daughter to do only what she wanted.

“I think it’s up to Zara,” Hamzah said carefully. “Personally, I’m going to concentrate on pudding.” The thickset man picked up a leather menu and held it in front of him like a shield.

Despite herself, Zara smiled.

The major smiled back and inside her head Zara shrugged. He was handsome in a flinty, movie-star kind of way, what with his granite jaw, brown eyes and hair just a little longer than Army regulations allowed. And he probably hadn’t expected his off-the-cuff suggestion to be pounced on quite so hard by her mother.

Besides, some problems were best got out of the way.

“Sure,” said Zara, pushing back her chair. “Why not?” She waited for a second while the major tried to catch the attention of the maître d’, then shrugged. “No sweat,” Zara said. “I can stop it myself.” And with that she reached for the emergency chain, which looped its way down one wall, and yanked.

Crockery hit the floor. Some from their table or others, but mostly from the arms of a stumbling waiter who’d been stacking plates in an opposite corner.

A woman screamed.

The tram stopped.

“Is there a problem?” The maître d’ was white-faced with anxiety, his French accent as broken as the Limoges china around his feet.

“Of course there’s a problem.” Zara grabbed the menu from her father. “Look at this. You haven’t even got chocolate ice cream . . .”

*“Cut his engines now.”*

“No.” Raf shook his head.

*“Come on.”* The fox sounded disgusted. *“It’s a clean shot.”*

It was too. The man stepping down from the abruptly stopped tram had paused to scan Ibrahim Square, one of his hands on Zara’s shoulder, the other thrust deep in his jacket pocket. He said something to the girl and she nodded carefully, but moved away the moment he tried to take her arm.

What reassured Raf was that Zara looked irritated rather than afraid.

And yet Place Ibrahim Pasha was deserted, the restaurant car obviously planned to make good its escape and somewhere below Zara’s feet were catacombs, cut into limestone a thousand years before the birth of the Prophet. Rumour said they spread beneath Pharos in endless dark passageways, rough-hewn chambers and deep oubliettes. Had Raf been Zara, he’d have been terrified.

*“Just do it,”* said the fox. *“Or maybe you’re afraid?”*

Of killing if necessary? No, Raf shook his head. He didn’t think so . . . If it wasn’t necessary? Then yes, very. And something else was worrying Raf, worrying him enough to make him rewrite his plans on the fly.

“That uniform . . .”

“So?”

“You recognize?”

*“Maybe it’s fake,”* suggested the fox.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” said Raf. Dress in the flashiest way possible. A bottle-green cavalry tunic with gold braid and sword knots to sleeves and collar. The kind of outfit guaranteed to make people look and remember. Rather than choose something anonymous like *sécurité*, whose black uniform made most people glance away, whether it was intended to or not.

Raf stood up, brushed dust from his knees and walked back to his bike.

*“Where are you going?”* the fox demanded.

“To talk to Zara.” Breaking stock from barrel, Raf folded his borrowed police-issue nightSniper in two, twisting off the tiny laser sight and dropping that in his pocket. The rest he clipped into place down one of the Honda’s front forks.

*“Very dinky . . .”*

Ignoring the fox, Raf stalked across the square, a figure dressed in black moving across an expanse of unlit ground. He was impressed the major spotted him so quickly.

“Zara.”

She turned when he called, the smile freezing on her face. Her eyes raked over him, seeing nothing in the darkness but distant light reflecting off the emptiness of his shades.

“Still wearing disguises, I see.”

“You know him?” Major Halim took a hand from his pocket.

“Oh yes.” She turned to the watchful major, her eyes bitter. “How could I possibly forget Ashraf al-Mansur . . .”

“The *bey*?”

Raf put out his hand, then lowered it again, unshaken. The police had a file on the General’s *aide de camp*, but then they had a file on pretty much everyone. “Whatever,” said Raf.

Major Halim had both hands clenched into fists, something Raf doubted the man even realized. And busy emotions worked their way across his movie-star face. Distrust battling doubt, caution fighting mistrust.

Caution lost.

Looking at the major’s handmade uniform, his immaculate leather boots, the careful disorder of his dark hair and a discreet signet ring on his left hand that signalled membership in a family known for its closeness to the Sultan in Stambul, Raf knew what was coming. He’d heard those rumours too . . .

“I have a brother at court,” said the major flatly.

“An elder brother,” Raf agreed, “Faud Pasha.” Facts collected themselves for use, the structure of the Sublime Porte’s directorate, the rank therein of Faud Pasha. “Second Minister for Internal Affairs.”

“First Minister,” Major Halim corrected.

“Acting First Minister,” said Raf firmly. “Married well. Trusted notary to His Sublime Majesty . . .” He could do this. He’d always had the skill, right back to when he was a kid. Every fact in his head was filed, cross-referenced, graded for likely importance. When he was seven Raf failed an exam. He did it to prove to himself that he could. There were other reasons too, but time was teaching Raf that it didn’t pay to dwell on those.

He glared at the major. “As for you . . . Unmarried, this year’s mistress in Al Qahirah, last year’s in Abukir, neither serious. An adequate trust fund but no capital and currently no way to pay your share of the extortionate repairs to the roof of Miclavez Court . . .”

Zara’s eyes when Raf checked were wet. For a woman who’d once told him she never cried, she’d taken to doing a good imitation.

“. . . Oh yes, and you once shot an eleven-year-old *felabeen* rioter.”

“He was . . .”

“Holding an empty starting pistol,” said Raf. “Something cheap, generic and Taiwanese.”

There were files on every member of Koenig Pasha’s staff. Even one on the General, though the ex-Chief had drawn the line on keeping one on the Khedive himself. Either that, or it was so well hidden Raf had yet to find the thing.

Keeping those files up-to-date had turned out to be simplicity itself. All Raf had to do was nothing. The web of informers put in place by his predecessor, Felix Abrinsky, kept spinning, once they realized they’d continue to get paid for each snippet of information. “Anything else you’d like to know about your friend?” Raf asked Zara, who promptly turned her back on him.

“What about you . . .?” Raf asked the major. “With me so far?” He watched uncertainty replace anger in the major’s eyes. Rumour might hurt but hard information was actively dangerous and Raf tossed it around like a throwing knife.

“There’s no record of . . .”

“Look,” said Raf, “let’s simplify things. Your brother checked me out in Stambul and found no record of my being an honorary attaché in Seattle . . .” He ticked points off on his fingers, trying not to miss any. “No one in special forces has heard of me, Sandhurst say I’m not on their files, St. Cyr ditto, I’m not on the Sultan’s official payroll and so far as your brother can find out, I don’t exist.”

Raf’s cold smile was wasted in the darkness, but his voice carried enough ice to make even Zara shiver. “Have you any idea of the level of security clearance that signifies?”

Slowly, reluctantly, Major Halim shook his head.

“Did you check me with my father?” Raf continued.

“The Emir?”

Yeah, the Emir of Tunis, apparently. That was what his aunt Nafisa had said, just before she got herself stabbed; Raf still didn't believe it, and it was hard to know in retrospect if she'd believed it or not. Whatever, no one had yet come out and said it wasn't true.

"Well? Did you?" said Zara, sounding suddenly interested.

"Yes, I did." The major looked nervous. "He wasn't able to answer."

"Why not?" Raf asked, and knew he'd won when the major actually shuffled his feet, looking like the small boy he must once have been back before Zara was born.

"He was unwell."

"You mean my father's mad," said Raf. "Stark raving." That was what Iskandryian intelligence had down in their files. The Khedive's second cousin lived in a tent near Nefzaoua Oasis, surrounded by heavily armed girls in green jumpsuits and guarded at all times by an elderly Frenchwoman. In private the Emir apparently favoured simple wool jebbas, but his public dress never changed from a striped jellaba, worn with a general's peaked hat.

He lived for hawks, grew generation after generation of saline-resistant grasses in a biodome on the edge of Chott el Jerid, Tunisia's salt-crust inland sea, and had once hired a Soviet cryptographer and one of Caltech's most brilliant geneticists to extract meaning from the randomness of junk DNA.

Political decisions the Emir made after consulting the heavens. Not listening to a pet astrologer, though that would have been bad enough, but asking questions of the constellations themselves. And when he spoke, in public or private, reports had it that he spoke only in complex couplets, perfectly cadenced and delivered after long thought.

Among the Berber tribes, who still traversed the empty sands and rock seas with little care for international borders, he was regarded as North Africa's sole sane ruler. It was a minority opinion and one with which it was obvious Major Halim didn't agree.

"So tell me," said Raf, "who am I?"

The major looked at the young princeling in the black leather coat, the dark glasses and black gloves whose pale hair blew in the slight night breeze. "The son of the Emir of Tunis," he said without hesitation.

Raf nodded and offered his hand. This time they shook.

"Very touching," said Zara. "Now if you've both finished with the male-bonding shit, perhaps Major Halim could escort me home. Of course," she added crossly, "if this wasn't El Isk I could get myself home. Since I'm perfectly capable of walking, chewing gum and looking where I'm going at the same time. But since this *is* Iskandryia and any woman alone at night is *obviously* a prostitute . . ."

Raf grinned. Then smiled some more at Major Halim's discomfort. "This is nothing," he said, "you wait until you know her better and she gets really cross."

"Better . . . ?" The major executed a tiny bow in Zara's direction. "Much as I'd welcome the chance to get to know Miss Quitrimala better, I'm afraid that's impossible." His tone was genuinely regretful.

"Don't tell me," said Zara, "you couldn't cope with a third mistress."

"It's not that," the major said, looking shocked. "I'm leaving for Berlin next week, on secondment to the *Thiergarten*. After that, if everything goes smoothly, I hope to become Iskandryia's attaché to Stambul." For a moment, admitting this, the major seemed almost bashful. But Zara was too cross to notice.

"Then what," she asked furiously, "was gate-crashing my supper about? All that sucking up to my mother. And the crap about me needing air and taking a walk . . ."

"This is difficult," said the major and glanced at Raf. When it became obvious that Raf refused to take his cue to withdraw, Major Halim sighed. "The Khedive intends to take a holiday . . . Well deserved obviously."

Zara opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. A sudden tension locked her shoulders, which refused to budge, even when she twisted her head from side to side. Zara had a nasty idea she knew exactly what was about to come next.

"His Highness was wondering if . . ."

"Have you talked to my parents about this?"

"Of course," the major said nervously. "Your father said it was your decision where you took your holidays and with whom. Which was not, to be honest, the reaction I was expecting. Your mother thinks it's an excellent idea."

I bet she does, thought Zara. Somewhere in her mother's finely gradated misunderstanding of Iskandryian society, the woman undoubtedly believed that being mother to the Khedive's mistress was even better than having a bey in the family.

Zara had been spot on about her mother's desperation that she take this walk, totally wrong about the motives. "It's not going to happen," she said calmly.

So calmly that even the major could hear her keep the anger in check.

“Tell the boy I’m not interested. Just that, nothing else. Don’t make it polite, don’t give my apologies or regrets because I’m not sending them . . .”

“You misunderstand,” the major said carefully. “You misunderstand completely. The Khedive’s intentions are entirely *honourable*.” He stumbled over the word, not certain how much he could actually say. In his own mind, before supper, when he’d been running through how to approach the coming evening, he’d seen them both taking a moonlit stroll through the terraces of the Palace Ras el-Tin while he proffered the Khedive’s invitation and she accepted gratefully.

“He doesn’t want to get me into bed?”

The major’s lips twisted. “Let me repeat myself. His intentions are strictly legitimate.”

Zara’s eyes widened. Impossible visions of palaces, sleek yachts, long holidays aboard the SS *Jannah* opened like flowers before her.

“And if I go on this holiday?”

“Then he’ll propose,” said Raf, “won’t he?”

Major Halim looked pained. “You can’t honestly expect me to comment.”

“God.” Raf laughed. “Koenig Pasha must be climbing a wall . . . Only my cousin could decide he needed to marry a hard-line republican. Not to mention occasional communist.” They had files on Zara too, back at the precinct. Files he could recite from memory.

“Have you spoken to my parents about that bit as well?” Zara asked the major.

Major Halim shook his head. “Only tentatively about the holiday. Enough to make clear that you would be an honoured . . .”

“Well, don’t,” Zara stressed. “Speak to them, I mean. It’s nothing they need to know.”

“They’re your parents.”

“Talk to either of them about this,” said Zara, “and I guarantee I won’t go.”

“But the Khedive is determined to do this properly. By the book . . .”

“You do realize,” Zara interrupted crossly, “that if the Prophet had been a woman, there wouldn’t even have been the Book, because no one would have listened, never mind written it down . . .”

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## CHAPTER 12

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### 8th October

**The first of that Friday’s calls to prayer found Raf** leaning against a seawall, watching smugglers run empty cigarette boats into Western Harbour under protection of both darkness, which came free, and the Commander of Ras el-Tin, whose protection came anything but . . .

And the Terbana Mosque’s definition of dawn seemed open to debate. The Mufti had defined it as the point not when light first touched the sky but when the absolute utterness of the night first lessened.

Raf thought the man was being unduly optimistic.

Hamzah’s call came four hours later, just as Raf was about to shower away the black dog of his wasted night. Because even blasting his police Honda to Abu Sir and back, fifty clicks along the shore, had done nothing to improve Raf’s mood, even though early mist had hung over the Mariout marshes and the Mediterranean had still worn her night colours.

“For you,” shouted Hani, her call echoing up the lift shaft from the haremlek below. “It’s Effendi.”

Raf had warned Hani not to call Hamzah that, but currently the child was paying zero attention to anything he said.

“Tell him I’ll call back.”

“He says it’s important.”

Sighing, Raf picked up his dressing gown from the floor and pulled on some old leather slippers that Khartoum insisted once belonged to Hani’s grandfather. When Raf made some glib comment about dead men’s shoes, the old porter had pulled deeply on the wrong end of a cigar and nodded like it was obvious.

“This alone is true,” he’d told Raf. “This here, at this time, for this person.” Khartoum had announced it like that was also obvious. Three days later Raf was still puzzling over that one.

“Uncle Raf . . .” Hani’s voice was tight with exasperation.

“I’m on my way.”

“ . . . You could always get comms installed up there.”

Raf nodded and slid back the metal grille to step into the lift. He could indeed, but he wouldn't. His floor was the only level of the *madersa* not fitted with a screen and he liked it that way.

“ . . . or you could try turning on your watch,” added Hani, when he finally reached her floor.

“But then you wouldn't have an excuse to complain, would you?” Raf said and punched a button to activate a screen. Hani stalked off in silence, chin up and shoulders rigid, and though Raf heard the slam of her bedroom door he didn't call her back.

Just after their Aunt Nafisa was murdered, Raf had made a promise to Hani not to send her away to school. Keeping his word was proving harder than he'd imagined. Particularly as everyone else seemed to think the girl would be better off living somewhere different, somewhere he wasn't. Until recently he'd have disagreed.

“Hamzah.”

“Your Excellency.”

“You don't need to call me . . .”

“This is official.” The industrialist's face was tight, with a greyness that suggested acute shock.

“Zara.”

“My daughter is here,” Hamzah said. “And she's fine. Although for reasons I don't understand, I gather you met her early this morning.”

“And Avatar?”

The man looked embarrassed. “Avatar's gone,” he said simply. “Kidnapped . . .”

“Avatar?”

Raf's explosion of anger brought Hani out of her room; or maybe it was the way he slammed the wall with the side of his fist. “How do you know?”

“I've had a note.”

“Demanding what?”

The man on screen took a deep breath and slowly released it. “That doesn't matter.”

“I'll need to see the note.”

“It no longer exists,” said Hamzah, staring out at Raf. “I burned it . . .”

“So what do you want?” Raf asked tightly. “Since you obviously don't consider you need police help to get Avatar back . . .”

“I want you to come out to the villa and take a look at something my gardener's just found . . .” With that, Hamzah fumbled at his end of the connection and the screen in the *haremek* went dead.

Even ripped open and with her feet washed by the waves, the girl might have shown signs of lividity had she been dead for much longer than a few hours. As it was, the skin was waxy and slightly warm, but gravity hadn't pooled blood along the underside of her legs. Both rigor and early, nonfixed lividity had yet to occur.

That gave Raf his time frame.

The killer had opened the blonde girl from pubis to sternum, then slashed again, straight across her rib cage, the cuts forming a cross. Smaller incisions, made at right angles, acted as stops to the cross. Her heart was missing, which was often the case in crimes of *mutillé*, so were both her lungs, and the killer had cut the initials *H.Q.* into her wrist.

Not a single print could be taken from her pale skin. Whoever had wielded the blade had worn surgical gloves, and from the cleanness of the incisions Raf put odds on her killer using a scalpel or filleting knife.

Mind you, since what little Raf knew of forensics came from reading notebooks left by Felix Abrinsky, the previous Chief, and since the fat man's notes were often impossible to decipher, Raf fully accepted that the sooner he brought in professionals the better.

“Sir, you might want to take a look at this . . .” The young policewoman carrying a camera kept her voice level, almost businesslike. Raf hadn't met her before but she looked about twelve and wore a black *hijab*, the traditional headscarf, checked along its edge in the blue and white of the WPF.

Her boss, Madame Mila, coroner-magistrate for women and head of the WPF, had obviously already warned her in general against talking to other departments, and against talking to the Chief of Detectives in particular.

Raf's way round this prohibition had been to point out the obvious.

"*Touristica*," he'd announced on seeing the body, mere seconds after arriving on Hamzah's beach. It didn't matter what gender tourists were, they still came under the *poliz touristica*, who reported to uniform; uniform automatically reported all unsolved serious to Raf.

"How do you know, sir?" Stuck between a rock and the proverbial, Raf thought, looking at her heavy face. Upset Madame Mila or upset Iskandryia's new Chief of Detectives.

"What's your name?"

"Leila, Your Excellency."

"Take a look at her breasts."

The young woman blushed but did what she was told. The breasts in question were small and pale brown.

"What do you see?"

Leila stayed silent, staring desperately.

"It's okay," said Raf, "take a look at her . . . lower half." The dead girl was completely naked, draped backwards across a rocky outcrop on Hamzah's beach. Her feet were underwater, the rest of her was beginning to mottle in the early-morning light.

"What do you see?"

The police officer peered closely, looking for abrasions or thumb marks, something to say the woman had first been raped, but her flesh was unbruised and nothing obvious sprang to mind.

"She . . . has a tan line round her hips?"

Raf nodded and Leila almost sighed aloud with relief.

"What else?"

"That's the only tan line."

"Neatly done." Raf flicked on his Seiko and hot-keyed Champollion Precinct. Not bothering to announce himself, he rattled off time, place and crime code. "The first official on the scene was Officer . . ." He glanced quickly at Leila.

"Durrell."

"Officer Durrell from the Women's Police Force who recognized immediately, from the tan mark of a bikini bottom and a corresponding lack of a tan mark for the breasts, that the victim had to be a tourist. Accordingly the crime scene was handed over to me as the most senior detective present."

Mind you, thought Raf, Officer Durrell was more impressed with his abilities than she need be. This was the second mutilated body to be found in a week. And since the first one was now on her way back to Austin in an icebox and the second was also blonde, young and obviously Western, it was difficult not to assume a pattern, albeit slightly unprofessional; since, having only two cases, the most Raf should be positing was a basic similarity.

Unfortunately, the police didn't know if the first victim had been raped. The pathologist had apparently forgotten to check.

In short, bleak sentences Raf ordered in a scene team and told the handler to notify Madame Mila's office of the change of responsibility. Only once did Raf's voice hesitate. Having just ordered that the tourist go to the nearest morgue, as soon as the site was swept and the crime-scene shots completed, Raf had a change of mind.

"No," he said, "send it to Dr. Kamila . . ." Kamila didn't work for his division but she could be persuaded, and she knew what she was doing. She was also a woman. In crimes like this that could count.

"Okay, Dr. Kamila it is. The pickup location? That's . . ."

Raf waited for the question, which never came. Instead the handler muttered a hurried Ten4 and broke his connection. Within minutes the fact that a naked tourist had been found butchered in the grounds of Villa Hamzah would be round Police HQ. Within half an hour the outer precincts would know.

The fact Raf had called in the crime would only make the titbit more juicy.

Turning on his heel, Raf stamped through the salt grass, which separated the rocky headland from the villa's terraces, and entered Hamzah's study through its garden door, without knocking. There was a conversation that needed to be had and Raf wasn't looking forward to it.

The industrialist was sitting at his desk, just as Raf expected. And he didn't even frown when Raf strode in from the garden.

"Where were you two hours ago?" Raf made little attempt to keep the anger out of his voice. This was the man who'd burned the note sent by Avatar's kidnapers. The man who'd pimped his naked daughter the night Raf walked out of that door, who was now pimping her again to the Khedive.

“Still dining with my wife at Maxim’s.”

*With my wife.* . . Raf looked for the slightest hint of irony in Hamzah’s face but there was nothing. “Can you prove that?”

Hamzah nodded. “I think they’ll remember us,” he said sourly.

“And this was a long-standing arrangement?”

“No,” said Hamzah, looking up. “It was very last-minute. Why?”

“Because there’s a butchered girl in your garden, round about where your daughter usually swims, and your initials are carved into her wrist. So what I want to know is the usual stuff . . . Who is she/where did she come from/who did it . . . ?”

“And if I tell you I have no idea?”

“No idea,” said Raf as he pulled a square of card from his pocket and tossed the Polaroid onto Hamzah’s desk. “No idea who did this?”

Hamzah Effendi picked up the photograph and began to tremble. The movement started in his fingers and spread like fever until his whole body shook. And his body kept shaking, even after he’d turned the photograph facedown and pushed it away from him.

His body was still shaking when he pushed back his chair to rush to the lavatory. And it was doing the same when he came back after vomiting up his breakfast and what had remained of the previous night’s meal.

“She was facedown,” he said. “When I saw her she was facedown.”

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## CHAPTER 13

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**8th October**

**“Eduardo?”**

Eduardo nodded from instinct. It didn’t matter that the person talking was half a city away and Eduardo’s watch wasn’t toggled to visual. He still nodded.

“*Na’am.* . . This is me.” Eduardo folded his broadsheet and placed it carefully on the table. He would have preferred one of the Arabic-language tabloids but he had his position to consider, so he always downloaded *L’Iskandrian* .

The Frenchman and Frisco were watching him from the corners of their eyes. He knew they’d both decided his watch was a fake and his new job just empty words, but they were wrong. Instinctively, Eduardo straightened in his café chair and ran one hand through his thinning hair, then discreetly rubbed his fingers clean on the side of his black chinos.

He listened in silence, nodding seriously now and then like a man agreeing with a particularly pertinent point. Not everyone had an elegant Silver Seiko that double-encrypted conversation and screened itself from vanP hacking.

“*Na’am,* I understand.” Eduardo did too—really—but just to be sure he asked the man to repeat his instructions more slowly.

Eduardo liked his new job. He even had an office, a third-storey walk-up off Place Orabi, above a haberdasher’s at the back of the bus depot. With the office and watch came new shoes, new trousers and a zip-up leather jacket that looked old and tatty unless you got really close, when it was possible to see that the scuff marks were printed onto the animal hide.

The man who gave Eduardo the jacket had pulled out a gravity knife, dropped its blade and driven it hard into the leather. The sharp point of the blade hardly even left a mark.

“Mesh,” he told Eduardo, “ultrafine, from spiders that shit steel.” Eduardo didn’t know whether the man was making fun of him or not. All the same, Eduardo liked what he now did. Which was mostly sit in cafés and talk politics, something he wasn’t sure he really understood. Listening to the counterarguments, Eduardo had discovered a talent for separating half-truth from mere wish. A cast-iron, built-in bullshit detector, the man called it, speaking as if such a machine might actually exist.

Eduardo imagined it as small, with cogwheels that whirred and narrow brass pipes that grew hot from circulating water. When Eduardo was a child he lived in a small burg in Namibia and the local train, to Windhoek and back, had run on coal and wood, dried dung too when the shortages began, though dung didn’t work that well.

“Mmm . . .” Eduardo said, nodding. “Sure thing.” He tossed a handful of silver onto the table. Time to go. His watch didn’t need him to shut down the connection, because it did that for itself. It did other things too, like bring him the latest football results and forecast that it was going to rain.

“Things to do,” he said to Frisco, speaking Ladino. “Deals to make.” Iskandryia was a city with a number of languages that might claim to be the lingua franca, of which Spanish Hebrew was just one. The other man nodded. Frisco had told Eduardo his real name but Eduardo kept forgetting, though he remembered that the man claimed his forefathers were *moriscos*, expelled from Spain.

When Eduardo started coming to the café, he and Frisco had played a few games of chess but now the old man made excuses not to play, probably because Eduardo kept losing.

Inside Eduardo’s office the air was cool, which was a miracle given his desk fan had fused and the October sun beat direct on an outside

wall; but the walls were thick, built decades before from limestone blocks stolen from a Coptic church three streets away. And anyway, closed shutters kept out much of the brightness. There was also an air-conditioning unit attached to one wall, a brown box that stuck its metal arse out into the street, as if threatening to shit on pedestrians beneath. Unfortunately that had been broken ever since someone hid a wank mag up the air outlet. When Eduardo first took the box apart to see if anything obvious was broken, he'd been left with frayed wires, rusting iron pipes and mildewed, disintegrating pictures of pale nipples and shaven pudenda.

So he'd put the casing back together and pushed the mags back where he found them, and now tiny mushrooms grew in clusters on the grey carpet, right below where the unit dripped water.

A Sony Eon3 sat on an otherwise clear desk. A simple Luxor terminal, he'd chosen it at random in a souk at the back of Rue Faransa. Glued to its side was an anonymizer, which had been given him by the man. On the 'mizer was a label, PROPERTY OF EL ISKANDRYIA POLICE DEPARTMENT: NOT TO BE REMOVED FROM CHAMPOLLION PRECINCT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.

Punching a key, Eduardo started random number software and waited. Without him having to ask, the terminal popped up a comms screen and Eduardo keyed in the number he'd just been given. Then he did what the man had told him to do.

Eduardo didn't know that he was being rerouted or that, at the receiving end, his call was logged as having come direct from Fez; all Eduardo knew was that a tiny icon on the screen's task bar lit green and a connection got made.

The person who picked up at the other end said nothing to introduce himself, which was fine, because that was what Eduardo had been told to expect.

"I'm taking the contract."

"Who gave you the details?" The voice was gruff.

"That doesn't matter."

"What guarantees do I have that the job will be done?"

"None."

"By the day after tomorrow or the line of credit closes."

"Tomorrow night," said Eduardo and broke the connection.

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## CHAPTER 14

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### 9th October

**"Don't you like pastries?"** Hani sounded puzzled instead of angry. She'd been ploughing her way through a dozen *basbousa*, stuffing them into her mouth with sticky fingers at the start, then eating more slowly and finally nibbling, mouselike around the edge, once she realized Raf wasn't going to tell her to stop.

Her lunchtime vitamin stood untouched by her plate.

"What?"

Raf glanced up to find dark eyes staring at him from a pinched face. He tried to make sure he and Hani ate together at weekends, while Donna bustled around in the background, banging together pans and clattering knives into a double stone sink, each side large enough to be a horse trough.

The kitchen took up most of the ground floor of the al-Mansur madera. Outside was a tiled courtyard with a fountain and beyond that a stone garden house, then a walled garden, roofed over with glass.

Above the kitchen was the *qaa*, where important guests were greeted. This had a large marble floor and smaller indoor fountain. The haremlek was a suite of rooms above the *qaa* and Raf's floor was at the top, above the haremlek.

The madera was vast, old and badly in need of repair, but no other room was as large as Donna's kitchen, which seemed to spread in all directions.

It had taken Raf a while to realize that Donna's clattering wasn't irritation at finding him cluttering up her space, which was so big a crowd couldn't have cluttered it; she objected to his presence for different reasons. People like Hani and His Excellency were meant to eat upstairs, at a marble table in the elegant *qaa*, waited on by others.

"You're not listening to me . . ." Hani said crossly.

"I'm sorry . . ." She was right. He wasn't.

There wasn't much else Raf could say. But Hani wanted more. Something dismissive of her concern, something adult. He could see that in her eyes, the wish for a fight so that she could stop being worried for him and go back to being angry.

"Look," he said softly, "let it go, okay?"

By the time the noise of her falling chair had finished echoing round the kitchen, Hani was out of the room and racing up the outside steps to the *qaa*. Raf listened to her shoes slap the floor overhead, then heard Hani slam a hand against the button for the lift. Seconds later the *madersa*'s ancient *Orvis* creaked into action.

Raf put his head in his hands. When he looked up again Donna was sitting on the other side of the table and in front of him was a tiny cup of Turkish coffee. It was the old woman's cure for everything.

"The child's young, Your Excellency."

Raf nodded.

"And she's scared."

"That I will send her away?"

Donna shook her head and discreetly rubbed her crucifix. "That you will die." The old woman's voice was matter-of-fact. "Since her aunt . . . She dreams all the time. That you die and she be left here alone." Donna shrugged. "They would not let people like me look after Lady Hana. They would not let me live here . . ."

Only Donna got away with calling the child by her real name. Everyone else had to use Hani. Named for the boy the child resented not being.

"Go to her, Excellency," said Donna, "and talk."

"And say what?" His question sounded weak even to him.

The old woman shrugged. "That you will not be going away. That you don't plan to die." Her lips twisted into a sour smile at Raf's expression.

"Well, does Your Excellency?"

Raf shook his head.

"No," said Donna, crossing herself. "Somehow I didn't think so."

"Go away." Hani didn't bother looking up from her screen. On the floor beside her chair sat an untouched toy dog, still in its packaging. It was the most expensive model Raf had been able to afford.

"It smells in here," said Raf.

She did look round at that.

"Old clothes," he said, gesturing to a bundle on the floor. "Old clothes and misery . . ." Raf pulled back the inner shutter of a *mashrabiya* and autumn sunlight washed into Hani's bedroom, through her balcony's ornately carved screen.

"Now I can't see my monitor."

"You can use it later," Raf said, "but first we need to talk." He sat on the red-tiled floor, his spine hard against the edge of her metal bed. The springs were rusted and the mattress so old that horsehair poked through holes in its cover. Changing the thing was absolutely out of the question, apparently.

"Sit by me . . ."

Hani sighed and made a great show of turning off her machine, even though they both knew it would have gone to sleep at a simple voice command. Then, surprisingly, she did as he asked and parked herself next to Raf, her own back pressed into the side of the bed. Dust flecks danced in the afternoon sunlight in front of them. Their ersatz randomness actually the result of immutable laws of heat and motion.

"I saw a body yesterday morning."

Hani grew still.

"It was at Zara's house. A stranger . . ." Raf added hurriedly.

"You've seen bodies before," Hani said.

He nodded, they both had. Aunts Nafisa and Jalila. Those deaths were one of the things that bound them together.

"When you were an assassin . . ."

"Hani!" They'd been through this before. "I was an *attaché* . . . Nothing more."

"*Attachés* are spies. Spies kill people. Everyone knows that."

Raf sighed.

“Who was he?” Hani asked.

“*She*,” Raf corrected. “And we haven’t found out yet.” Obviously enough, he didn’t mention the mutilation, which was actually a *cross potent* according to the pathologist, who’d looked it up.

Toxicology showed heavy traces of an mdma clone in the victim’s blood and alcohol in her stomach. The girl had been alive and conscious from the start of the attack until near the end. And swabs taken from her oral, anal and vaginal mucosa indicated that she’d first been raped, then cut. So Raf now had a file to read on *crosses coupe*, which had apparently been the mutilation of choice during something called “the little war.” There was one bite mark, below her right breast, but that was faded and the bruise yellow. So either it happened before she arrived in Isk, it was the result of a casual holiday romance or her boyfriend had come with her but had yet to step forward.

Which, at least, would give Raf one sensible suspect. Provided the boyfriend could be shown to have nerves of steel and a reasonable grasp of anatomy.

“The trouble,” Raf told Hani, “is in realizing when facts aren’t related . . .”

He halted himself there, wondering whether to begin again and decided not to bother with the talking. With luck, sitting next to Hani would be enough, because when he was a child, the point at which adults started in on explanations was the moment he stopped listening.

“Everything is related,” said Hani. And glancing sideways, Raf realized her face was screwed up in thought. “That’s what Khartoum says . . .”

The kid was nine, whipcord thin, with the body of a child younger still and eyes old before their time. Lack of sleep, bad dreams and night sweats, he remembered them all well. Although, these days, if Raf worked at it, he could go for months without recalling them once.

“Maybe he’s right,” said Raf finally. “Maybe everything does connect.”

“You don’t know?” Hani looked interested.

“No.”

“I thought spies knew everything.”

“Not me.” Raf shook his head. “Me, I know nothing, except that I’m not going to send you away, I’m not going to leave you and nobody is going to kill me . . .”

“Aunts Jalila and Nafisa were killed . . .” She waited for Raf to nod, which he did. “But the reason’s a secret . . .”

Raf nodded again.

“Why?”

“Because . . .” Raf stopped. “Because that’s the way things work in Iskandryia.” He ignored the doubtful expression on her face. “What can I tell you? What the General says goes.”

“Koenig Pasha?” Hani looked suddenly relieved. “Not Zara’s idea? Not yours . . .”

Raf shook his head, his half smile a reflection of hers.

Hani nodded. “I was worried,” she said, “that it was Zara. If it’s Koenig Pasha who says we must lie, then that’s different . . .” Her shrug was almost comically adult. “Lying is his job.” For a second, she sounded almost exactly like her late unlamented Aunt Nafisa.

There were, it turned out, two entirely separate levels of morality in Hani’s world. One occupied by those, like him, her and Zara, who weren’t meant to lie, and another given over to those destined to massacre the truth.

Pushing himself to his feet, Raf wondered what would happen when the child finally realized that if he was a spy, then she’d got him filed under the wrong group.

“Where are you going?” Hani demanded.

“Out,” said Raf.

“The murder?”

Raf shook his head. “Something else . . .”

Hani regarded him carefully. “I thought you were going to leave finding Avatar to someone called Eduardo?”

“*Hani!*”

“So I listened,” said the child. “Anyway . . . you need me to help with the search.”

“I don’t.”















































































































































































































































