

Owlient



# Amira, Princess of Egypt

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# Prologue

Fever gnaws at me, and so does shame. I am alone in this land of Egypt where the orders of my general Ptolemy have led me. What has become of my brothers in arms? I left the battlefield at the edge of the river Hydaspes once the General gave the order to retreat. I saw Alexander the Great fall from the back of Bucephalus as arrows rained down above him from the archers perched in trees and atop iron-clad elephants. I saw many, many Greeks, Macedonians, Persians and Indian barbarians die in these monstrous forests where only rain flowed more than blood. Was it us, Alexander's soldiers, or the Indian barbarians who were the most barbaric in this butchery?

In the seven years since we left Macedonia, conquering these distant realms one by one, he galloped before his troops on his trusty steed Bucephalus, instilling us with strength and courage, promising us gold and glory before each fight, foot soldiers and riders alike shouting his name and swearing to surpass themselves. This man, who had endured as many blows in combat as all of the veterans put together, was able to push us beyond our limits. Thanks to him we would become heroes, crowned with honour and glory, adored by all. Our families would become rich and our memory would be honoured long after our death. It was so exhilarating to fight for a king like Alexander!

But after crossing the endless passes of the Hindu Kush, swept by icy winds, then the hostile forests flooded with rain and infested with deadly snakes, the filthy water ravaging us with bloody fever, many of us wanted to turn back. I can still see him, our King Alexander, sitting astride his fabulous black horse, urging us to continue fighting in spite of the fatigue and fear gnawing at our guts. We followed him, one more time. To our misfortune.

We found neither gold nor glory, only death and desolation. After the fall of our wounded king, General Ptolemy took control. He entrusted me with a mission that would take me far away from the battlefield for a long time.

I galloped west tirelessly. But there was another kind of battle going on in my head; the object given to me by Ptolemy had begun to seize control of my mind.

The voices of invisible beings ordering me to return to my king, accusing me of treason, threatening me with the very worst torments of Hades. At night, sleep eluded me, like hideous nine-headed snakes standing in my way. I tried to slice off the heads but in vain; they grew back and multiplied endlessly. Haggard, I rode straight ahead, passing the ancient pyramids of Heliopolis that protected the spoils of the pharaohs of this country in their eternal resting place. The stone deities seemed to stand guard over these man-made desert mountains. I travelled further west, fleeing the company of travellers and villagers. It was in this valley that my loyal horse fell, bitten by a giant snake. I buried him with regret and then attempted to continue on foot, but I soon succumbed to exhaustion, to the burning sun, to fever.

The following night, a white horse came to me, intimating that I should follow him. He looked exactly like my dead horse and I was delighted to be reunited with him in Hades. But when I felt his warm breath on my face, I realised that my time had not yet come. I stood up, leaning against his flank, and followed him to this shelter, where I gradually recovered my strength thanks to the spring hidden within and the fruits and small game of the valley.

I am not the first to have occupied this building. By observing these representations of an ancient people, I guessed that they had engraved into the rock prayers to their animal-headed gods, the very same ones who watch over the pyramids. I do not know why they left the shelter, but they have left their sculptor's chisels and coloured powders behind them. And also scrolls of papyrus, this plant that grows in abundance near rivers, on which I began to tell my story.

But soon the cursed object began to torture me once again, in spite of the protection of the Egyptian gods. So I made this shameful decision to part with it, as I still had some degree of lucidity. But I had to make sure that it could never fall into anybody's hands. I remembered Odysseus' ruse during the conquest of the city of Troy, which even the illustrious hero Achilles had not managed to take. He had a giant wooden horse constructed, inside which the elite warriors hid. The horse was left in front of the city walls as an offering, and a rumour was spread that the Greeks had abandoned the siege of Troy. As dawn broke, the Trojans discovered the horse and brought it into the city. As they celebrated their victory, the elite warriors exited the belly of the wooden horse like silent snakes and opened the doors of Troy wide. The hidden Greek fleet returned to take Troy and raze it to the ground. The wise Odysseus said,

"The best kept secrets are hidden in plain sight."

*Papyrus scrolls found in 2014 in a cave in the Natron Valley in Egypt. They were probably written in around 320BC by Lieutenant Demetrios of the army of Alexander the Great.*

“Leyla, my dear, is the caramel almost ready?”

The kind voice of Aunt Wadiha yanks me out of my reverie. I let out a little cry upon discovering that the valuable contents of the pot are beginning to turn brown. I quickly turn off the gas hob and, using the tip of my index finger, flick a drop of the hot liquid onto the side of a teacup. If the drop runs then it's not done enough. If it solidifies immediately then the caramel is just right. And this turns out to be the case. I quickly squeeze some lemon juice over the mixture and beat it vigorously with a wooden spoon. I lift the spoon several times, the honey-coloured threads stretching lazily. Phew! I've managed to save this precious mixture, this so-called “caramel”, falsely suggesting sweetness. It is in fact a sugar wax for hair removal, destined for the clients at my Aunt Wadiha's beauty salon!

“*Masa'a al-khair!* Good evening, ladies, your favourite tormentor has arrived!”

When I enter the main room of the beauty salon, the clients become restless, cackling like chickens frightened by the intrusion of a hungry fox. It's the Thursday evening ritual: making yourself beautiful before the weekend, which in Egypt is on Friday and Saturday. Freshly manicured hands and painted nails dance to the rhythm of laughter and soft curses that rain down on my head as I hand out the caramel to the beauticians.

“How come it's the prettiest girl in Cairo that brings such misery?” giggles Oum Alim, causing her generous folds of fat, each measuring the fortune and love of her husband according to custom, to jiggle.

“Beauty requires a bit of suffering, *Habibti!*” laughs Sitt Dounia. “Leave the little one alone!”

“So, I hear you have a boyfriend?” whispers Patil Papazian as discreetly as a burst of Kalashnikov fire, her eyes rolling with her eagerness for gossip.

Here comes the interrogation... Why does Aunt Wadiha need to tell my life story to her clients? I can feel myself going as red as a pepper!

“Is your Prince Charming cute? Is he well off? Being an American and all, I hope he's not divorced? How did he propose? Was it romantic? Does he have his own apartment? How many children do you want?...”

How many children? That's not what's going on between John and me at all! All he's done is give me a hand with historical research online, because he's an IT pro and I'm useless, invited me to lunch at the campus and offered to give me a lift back after class in his rubbish Simca 1000... He wanted to take me to Alexandria tonight! I refused, of course. Who does he think he is? A Prince Charming astride his white horse, appearing from nowhere to lop off the head of a truly nasty dragon with a single blow of his sabre? Even in

my childhood dreams, I was knocking Prince Charming from his horse and riding off on the stallion on an incredible, endless journey. I've never needed a Prince Charming to get by in life and I'm not going to start now!

In an effort to swiftly change the subject, I ask the clients what they'd like to console themselves with after the whole caramel ordeal: lemonade, tea, coffee, karkadé made from Sudanese hibiscus flowers or simply a glass of water, along with my aunt's famous tray of "sweet kisses". Mini-portions – to stop them feeling guilty – of baklava, mahalabiya, basbousa and qatayef, thick orange flower syrup, which is ultra fatty and super-sweet...

I busy myself in the kitchen preparing the trays of sweets, all while keeping an eye on the clock on the wall. I sigh – still a good hour before the salon closes, and then, freedom here I come! Yet I really appreciate the atmosphere of the salon, this haven of peace where Muslims, Druzes, Christians and Jews have adopted the unspoken agreement to ignore religious differences in order to enjoy bonding as women. If only our male leaders, the cynics, the tyrants, the fanatics and the sexists, could get a taste of such wisdom, what a world this would be! I shrug off this impossible thought and send an imaginary kiss to my marvellous aunt; she deserves the Nobel Peace Prize! I am so grateful she persuaded me to work in her salon after finishing my studies at the American University of Cairo. Thanks to the generous *baksheeshes* – tips from clients – in addition to my salary and my scholarship, my education has barely cost my parents a penny. And I can study what I always dreamed of: archaeology and particularly Egyptology, the science that allows me to decipher the secrets of the extraordinary civilisation of Egypt. Who said these were jobs just for men?

Finally the day and the week comes to an end. The salon has been tidied, polished and is as clean as a whistle. I take off my white blouse, put on some jeans, a T-shirt and trainers and tie my hair in a tight bun to hide it under my helmet. I'm glad I don't really have curves and can pass for a boy; not all Egyptians are as open and tolerant as my family. I should mention that my mother is a Muslim who married an American Catholic ornithology enthusiast and her sister, Aunt Wadiha, married a Copt – an Orthodox Christian – from the first Egyptian church founded in the year 40 by the apostle Mark. It can't have been easy in their day, but they stood their ground and I'm proud of them. I will also marry for love, if I ever meet the man of my dreams one day! But until this hypothetical day arrives, I'm enjoying my tomboy "freedom". And trousers are much better for riding a scooter or a horse!

My aunt stuffs a large package wrapped in aluminium foil into my backpack. It's the doggy bag of sweet kisses that the clients didn't get their greedy hands on, my aunt explains. But I know that she always plans astronomical amounts on Thursdays, just to fatten up her niece. I give my generous aunt, who reminds me to be very careful on the road, an affectionate hug and go into the backyard to start up my old, rather unreliable scooter. Yes it was indeed John who tinkered with it, seeing as he is as good a mechanic as he is a computer scientist, but hey, let's stop talking about him!

I slip between the building's bins and, as soon as I pass through the gate and reach the road, I am bombarded by the familiar sprawl, smells and noises of the city. Welcome to the indescribable combination of excitement and sluggishness that is the streets of Cairo. I weave between the passers-by with difficulty, many of whom are doing some last-minute window shopping before nightfall and the imams' calls to prayer. A dense, diverse crowd, traditional and Western clothing blending together. My gaze glides over the kitsch and crowded shop windows, all coexisting alongside modern and Westernised boutiques. I can smell the appetising scent wafting from the stalls selling falafel, the fried chickpea fritters drizzled with a garlic sauce, lemon and sesame cream. *Ahouas*, cafés where the men come to smoke *sheesha*, the Egyptian version of a hookah, and to play heated games of backgammon, slamming the pieces down the board. The pavements are littered with stalls for videocassettes, CDs, DVDs, counterfeit versions of the major US and European brands, as well as fishmongers, spice merchants and sellers of tin kitchen utensils. I narrowly avoid a vendor pouring out a bucket of water in front of his window to damp down the dust. The shoeshiner squatting nearby cries out indignantly at the muddy splashes on his workbench; he will have to start his work all over again. But just when the altercation between the two men begins to ignite, a customer calls the vendor over. His saccharine smile reappears and he forgets the incident instantly. I finally manage to reach the road where a public taxi is honking like a madman, trying to get a cart pulled by a donkey that is blocking the street to move. I weave through as best I can, narrowly avoiding being crushed by a truck spluttering black diesel smoke, to approach a crossroads jam packed with vehicles of all ages and finally make it to a wider avenue where I can pick up some speed.

Oh no, the traffic has come to a standstill, like a bunch of flies stuck in an open honey jar. The policeman can gesticulate and blow their whistles as loudly as they want; Thursday evenings in Cairo are a real nightmare for traffic. Oh well, I'll take a different route, even if it is less safe; the one that passes through Tahrir Square, the so-called Liberation Square that has been the focus of so much discussion since the 2011 Egyptian revolution...

The revolution left me pretty shaken up, like so many young people of my generation. I was just 14 years old and discovered this wind of freedom that made our hearts flutter, setting both minds and streets ablaze, ending in bloody clashes, apparent crackdowns and violence from all sides. The bitter embers of the "return to normality" have taught us to be cautious. Is risking a beating the best way of getting your voice heard? We took to radio and social networks, and despite the disillusionment, there is still hope that we will be able to make this world a better place.

"*Yallah!* Move, you idiot!"

Lost in thought, I had not realised that the flow of vehicles was beginning to move again,

as slowly as warm caramel. The impatient horns and aggressive gestures accompanying the drivers' rants jerk me into action and I begin to quickly weave in and out of the lines of cars. I make a detour through the alleyways that line the Nile's canals, under the balconies filled with flowerpots, the scent of silt and fish competing with roses and jasmine. But here at least it is less dense with exhaust fumes. Then I join the main roads once more that lead me to the southeast of the city. I will head slightly north and take the road to Alexandria. It's a real gymkhana joining the team of Jean-Yves Empereur, the famous French archaeologist leading the emergency excavations right in Alexandria's town centre. For, in addition to the amazing underwater discoveries on the site of the old lighthouse, with all the remains from the Ptolemaic era, Alexandria still holds many secrets. The ancient city having been built on top of by the modern city, excavations are only possible when old buildings are demolished and new roads and bridges are built or reconstructed. And one day, will we finally discover the tomb of Alexander the Great???

Here in Alexandria in 283BC, just before his death, his former Greek General, Ptolemy, later the father of a long dynasty of pharaohs that ended with the tempestuous Cleopatra in 30BC, completed the construction of the tomb of Alexander the Great. He had the mummified remains of the Conqueror repatriated from Memphis to give him a final burial worthy of his glory. But between the conflicts, the fires, the devastating earthquakes and the greed of grave robbers and unscrupulous treasure hunters fascinated by Egypt, no one has ever found the famous tomb. And what if I were to find it???

Alright, enough daydreaming. As I am only an intern and am already incredibly lucky to have been accepted onto the last dig, it's more than likely that I'll spend hours on all fours sifting through dust, hoping to find a fragment of pottery or a chicken bone as evidence of an ancient meal. But archaeology is as much about patience as passion, and you have to start by collecting clues as seemingly insignificant as fossilised rubbish!

Turning the corner of a series of decrepit buildings, the monumental pyramids of the Giza plateau appear, looming in front of me. Cheops, Chephren and Micerinus, the majestic tombs of kings, queens and great figures of the Pharaonic era, not to mention the famous Sphinx, all the surviving remnants of Egyptian civilisation from 4,500 years ago. Although I know them by heart, a shiver of awe runs down my spine. It was seeing them for the first time that made me want to become an archaeologist.

As a child I felt like Howard Carter discovering the tomb of Tutankhamen and his fabulous treasure in the Valley of the Kings in the early 20th century. And I made my parents scream when they discovered the decimated kitchen garden and the walls covered with clumsy, sticky hieroglyphics...

As they cannot yet admire my future discoveries, tourists from around the world gather around the pyramids instead. And countless buses pile up in the car park, waves of people flooding out, heckled by souvenir sellers. I know how important tourism is to the economy of my country, but sometimes I dream of deserted streets. I finally make it to the "Desert Highway", the road connecting Cairo and Alexandria, and, taking care as the other drivers are as keen as I am to enjoy the weekend, I open up the throttle...

The Desert Highway... It is anything but deserted! Night will soon fall and I have to blink away the fatigue caused by the glare of headlights, apparently regulated in accordance with the Egyptian Highway Code. I ride for almost 100 kilometres and the traffic remains just as dense in both directions. The inhabitants of Cairo are heading to the beach for the weekend while the buses bring tourists to the capital. In Egypt, the tourists all flock to the valley of the Nile, between Abu Simbel, Luxor, Cairo and Alexandria, to visit the pyramids, temples, tombs and remains of our fallen Pharaohs. Others prefer to go diving in the Red Sea or walk up the mystical steps at Mount Sinai. But 94% of the land is occupied by deserts, the Libyan to the west and the Arabian to the east. And they contain many unknown treasures. Oh no, don't tell me there's another traffic jam! This time I've had enough of slaloming between the nauseating exhaust pipes and the rubbish thrown onto the road by drivers. I'll take the small lanes of *Wadi El Natrun* and drive alongside the motorway, getting back on it further up. Although the roads are not as good, at least I'll feel like I'm moving!

After a few questionable manoeuvres on my scooter, I take a small, narrow road heading north-west to the rocky heights that criss-cross the dunes like the dorsal ridges of buried dinosaurs. There are very few vehicles driving here and, sighing comfortably, I pick up a bit of speed. But not too much, because who knows whether a couple of goats will suddenly decide to cross the road or not. Or perhaps the tarmac, as old as Herod himself, is concealing a sneaky pothole or two. Or maybe rocks have fallen at the corner of a bend and are blocking the road. Or maybe a sheepdog will suddenly race towards me without warning... ah, the joys of quiet roads! I smile at seeing the headlights of the stationary vehicles on the motorway in the distance and accelerate slightly to mock them, when suddenly my scooter's engine starts to stutter. Oh no, John, I hope that your tinkering doesn't let me down now! I narrowly avoid been thrown over the handlebars. I am just starting to recover when a deafening horn causes me to swing back to the side of the road. I only just avoid being smashed into by a pickup truck loaded with watermelons coming straight at me, headlights broken, horn blaring, outraged. Then everything happens in slow motion, like a scene in a horror movie. I feel myself being shunted to the side of the road as the engine coughs, backfiring one last time before giving up the ghost and cutting the power to the headlights. I put my feet on the ground and brake with all my strength to prevent the weight of the bike from carrying me over into the abyss I assume is below me. But it's a waste of time; the wheels of the scooter are slipping, dragging us inexorably downwards. Instinctively I jump to the side, leaving the vehicle to fall, and I go tumbling down, rolling over and over, before feeling myself slip into unconsciousness...

I am woken by the cold. I groan, trying to pull the covers back over me, but everything around me is hard and uncomfortable. Where am I? I sit up with a start as the images of my scooter accident come back to me. Apart from a pain in my knee I seem to be in one



piece; my backpack cushioned my fall. Fumbling, I take off my backpack and my helmet and look around at where I have landed. This rocky outcrop, overgrown with thorn bushes, stopped my fall. Above me, a sliver of moonlight casts ghostly shadows onto the rock wall towering fifty feet above me. No chance of getting out that way. Downhill, the slope is much less steep. If I have to move, it'll be downwards. And I don't think there's any point in hoping that I'll be able to repair the jumble of broken pieces I can see far below me that used to be my scooter.

In the meantime, I'm alive and I need to warn the excavation team that I've had... a minor setback, and that I'll be joining them... damn, I have no idea what time it is except that it's night. Well, I'll join them as soon as possible. I open my backpack to take out my mobile phone. Ah. If I thought that my bag had helped to break my fall, it's nothing compared to the contents. The bottle of water has exploded and the "sweet kisses" are nothing more than a sticky mush of crumbs and aluminium, among which I can make out bits of broken glass, plastic and electronics. I salvage the SIM card from my phone, wipe it on my T-shirt and slip it into the pocket of my jeans. Well, looks like I'll have to make do without my phone. Welcome to prehistoric times! I continue sifting through my backpack. Ah! My mini-torch is still working. Cool! But I won't be able to use my spare clothes for much. My notepad is also oily and slimy but, having a sudden brainwave, I dig out a ballpoint pen and write... not a will and testament as such, but a reminder of who I am and who should be notified if I'm not found alive. Well, I suppose it is a sort of a will and testament. Damn, I'm not usually so morbid! Come on, I'm going to be fine. I decide to leave behind my backpack and helmet with the notepad clearly visible. I'm going to look for a way to rejoin the road and hitchhike to Alexandria, even if it has to be on a cart pulled by a donkey!

In the cold light of the moon, I hobble carefully down the rocky slope, avoiding the undergrowth and the stones rolling under my shoes. I'm going to save the batteries in my mini-torch as much as possible. I am now at the centre of some sort of canyon, an ancient dried-up riverbed, and I really hope that it will lead somewhere. I stop and listen; I think I can hear a distant echo, like a whisper. If there are any people around, they will surely show me a way to get back onto the main road. Galvanised by this thought, I hurry on. But the closer I get to the source of the whispering, the more my hope that it is a person begins to diminish. It sounds like the weak gurgling of a stream, particularly as the desert vegetation, desperate for the slightest drop of water, is becoming denser. At least I'll be able to have a drink. I push aside some acacia branches and freeze. I thought I saw something white through the foliage. My heart pounding, I squint, trying to make out this strange figure without being spotted.

Is it a *Jalabiya*, the traditional long Egyptian tunic without a collar or belt, and if so, what could someone be doing out at night in this wild place? No, it's something longer, standing immobile, alert and aware of my presence. Suddenly the shape shudders and, in a nervous leap, stampedes off through the bushes in fear. I can hear the clapping of hooves on the stony soil moving away before stopping again. It's a white horse! Despite having been scared to death and in spite of the precarious situation in which I find myself

in this remote canyon, the luck of finding this horse makes my heart swell with joy. There is only one thought running through my mind: I have to find him!

No, find HER, this wild mare, as elusive as the moon. I walk slowly through the canyon, pushing aside reeds, tamarisk branches and bushy halfa grass. To encourage myself and to familiarise the mare with my presence, I hum an Egyptian lullaby, whose tune I remember, even if I don't recall the words. Then I improvise some comforting lyrics to reassure the mare. Maybe it will work?

She's decided to play hide and seek. Every time I get near her, her muscles begin to quiver under her coat and she walks away, but I can tell that she is paying close attention. Will her curiosity overcome her fear? Still humming, I walk closer and this time manage to get within ten feet of her. Under the incredible weight of her forelock, a moonbeam reflects briefly in her large black eyes as her nostrils quiver and ears rotate, indecisively, like weathervanes in the wind. I instinctively freeze so as not to break this magic moment. I continue my melody very quietly, admiring the elegance of the mare, her concave profile, her raised tail, her strong muscles and long silky mane. She has the look and dignity of a thoroughbred Egyptian Arabian, highly sought after in the world of racing. An *Amira*, a real princess. What is she doing all alone in this hostile canyon? Has she escaped from a breeding farm? Had she been mistreated?

This daughter of the moon is ready to flee at the least suspicious movement, the slightest rustling of leaves, though now and then, bending her neck, she lowers her head to the ground. If only I had an apple or a sugar cube to offer her, maybe she would come nearer. Slowly, and without taking my eyes from her, I push my hand into the back pocket of my jeans. Who knows what might be there, a squashed Turkish delight or a sachet of sugar absentmindedly picked up from university? But this simple movement is enough to awaken her ancestral fear of predators, and the mare runs away again, ears pinned back, kicking out defiantly. I don't think she'll come back and I am overwhelmed by a childlike grief, just like when you have to tear yourself out of a wonderful dream.

I let out a heavy sigh, stretch my stiff limbs and try to bring myself back to a reality that's much less enchanting. It's night-time and I find myself without any means of communication or transport, somewhere in the rocky foothills of the *Wadi El Natrun*, so-called due to the valley's high natron content, the antiseptic, absorbent salt essential for mummification in ancient Egypt. Nowadays it is used for manufacturing glass, the crystals being harvested twice a year on the shores of the salt lakes that I can just make out at the bottom of the valley. I consider heading towards the lakes to find help, but if it were the time of year when natron is collected, I would see light in the camps of the seasonal workers recruited for this challenging work. But the only light emanating from the lakes is the reflection of the night stars. So I will either have to climb the side of the mountain and try to find some kind of trail or I'll have to continue following the dry wadi and hope I can find a way out. As I have never been particularly good at climbing, I choose

to follow the wadi. If a torrent once roared down this bed to reach the waters of the Nile and flow into the Mediterranean, I too will end up reaching the sea... Let's do it!

I can't go on. I'm dying of thirst. It feels as though I've been walking for hours and I've only been going in circles. Damn! I stumble for the hundredth time and fall flat on my face, like a poor loaf of bread fallen from the oven. I don't know whether it's a result of the accident, but it's as though a dam breaks and tears of despondency overwhelm me. I almost want to stay here, lying on the floor, crying my eyes out, and allow myself to die. I feel as though I'm ranting, calling for help through my tears, for my parents, my Aunt Wadiha, John and *Amira*, when the sound of branches crackling nearby jerks me out of my dejected state, giving me a rush of adrenaline. Something is approaching me from behind. It stops. It approaches again and sniffs my hand. My terror is replaced by great joy. Through the hair covering my eyes I recognise *Amira*, the white mare, and feel her breath and her long mane stroking my hand, my arm. She comes closer, pushing me with the tip of her nose and letting out a muffled whinny, as though she is trying to get me to wake up, to stand up. I shudder and she recoils. Then, as gently as possible, I roll onto my side and push myself up as she watches on anxiously. But she does not run away. I whisper softly to her, standing up slowly so as not to frighten her. But as I walk towards her, she shakes her head and takes a few steps backwards.

"Don't go, *Amira*, please!"

She watches me for a long time, motionless, before turning around and taking a step forward, then another. She turns her head towards me, stamping her hoof. I think she's waiting for me, wanting me to follow her. So I do. She walks forwards, waits for me, and I follow her as best I can. Where is she taking me?

It's not long before I start to hear the sound of water trickling again, teasing me. I'm so thirsty. It must be an illusion, as the vegetation is so dry and scarce now; the foliage stroking me feels more like bats scratching than a hammam oil massage after the steam baths... I close my eyes to focus on this rustling sound, far in the distance. A trickle of water dripping along a wall, ricocheting drop by drop, the sounds becoming duller, deeper, gurgling. *Amira* seems impatient. She stomps, telling me to move. Now she is guiding me along a narrow gully, leaving the wadi bed to wind up between the rocks towards a gigantic boulder, smooth and surrounded by bushes. I stop short, taken aback. How am I going to make it around this boulder?

*Amira* stomps the ground impatiently, twirls around and moves behind me, butting me in the back with her head to get me to move. I do so, moving forwards along the gully, noticing that the echo of the water is building in intensity. I turn back to *Amira*, realising that she has guided me to a spring. But she is far behind me, nodding her head before whinnying softly and taking off in the opposite direction. It's now up to me to take care of myself, she seems to be telling me.

I'm in front of the boulder, but the spring remains hidden. I decide to climb up a bit and put my ear to the wall, as the sound of dripping water is much stronger up here. Panting, I trample over thorn hedges, approach the wall and hook my fingers into a crack. As I haul

myself onto my tiptoes to press my ear against the wall, I suddenly slip on some small pebbles, fall backwards and find myself on my hands and knees, on a bed of tough roots, thorns and loose stones. The pain in my knee returns, adding to my stinging palms. I curse my clumsiness while I reach for the wall to push myself up with one hand. But apart from a few thorny brambles, my hand encounters nothing but emptiness and I topple headfirst into darkness...

It seems as though I've fallen into a natural cave. I can't see where it ends. Now is the time to turn on my mini-torch. I get on all fours and slide carefully into this rocky passage, guided by the hypnotic sound of the invisible water. Blood is throbbing in my temples and my senses have become sharpened out of anticipation and apprehension. What will I find at the bottom of this cave? A nest of venomous snakes, a litter of caracals, desert lynxes, whose mother will tear me to shreds with her fangs and claws to defend and feed her young... or perhaps a mummy bedecked with amulets, ready to lay a curse on me?

After crawling along the tunnel on all fours for thirty feet, the ceiling stops scraping the top of my head and suddenly rises. Stooping slightly I'm able to walk. The rock is so thick that it feels as though I'm locked in a refrigerator set at 5°. It's pretty cold and I start to shiver under my sweat-soaked clothes. The slope becomes steeper and leads me into a kind of cavern where I can stand up straight. I'm panting like an old ox, I'm more withered than a mummy and my muscles feel like they're about to seize up. But at least I haven't come across anything unpleasant so far. I scan the walls around me, using the beam of my torch, and see that the rock to my right has rivulets of water running over it and flowing lazily towards a kind of natural basin. The water which flows over the edge trickles down the back of the basin, seeping through the rocks where I can't follow it. I kneel down, cup my hands and taste the water, hoping that it is not extremely saline from the natron or polluted from chemical fertilisers. But it is freshwater, with no suspicious aftertaste as it has been thoroughly filtered by passing through the rock. So I drink greedily, grateful to the incredible white horse who understood my need and led me to this spring. How I would love to see her again!

Now that I'm rehydrated, I can leave the way I came and continue on my way back to civilisation. Hey, something hard just moved beneath my feet, clinking against a rock. It looks like a ring, linked to another... It's a metal chain! Is it possible that another human ventured into this cave before me?

I waddle forwards, tracing my way along the chain, pulling it between my fingers like a rosary and taking care not to hurt myself on the rusty splinters. The end is riveted into the rock near the basin. I turn around and follow the chain back the other way, wondering where it will lead me. Wham! Obviously in this darkness as thick as chickpea soup, I could not have guessed that I would need to crawl again! I rub my forehead and lie on the floor like a snake so that I can slide under this new archway. I move forwards cautiously as the slope begins to rise slightly and I make a few turns that leave me completely disorientated. I end up in a passage where I can stand up again. I stretch and crack my spine and my forearm knocks against something behind me. I make out a piece of wood, fixed into what seems to be a metal container riveted into the rock. I sniff the end and recognise an ancient, burnt odour; it must be a torch. I follow the path of the chain and

continue exploring. Rock, rock and more rock... and then the end of the chain, riveted into the wall. I continue looking around. Rock, rock, and rock again... ah, wood! The wood is almost flat, a plank standing upright, and there's some other planks... maybe a door?

I search for a handle to open this mysterious door, before realising that these planks seem to have been placed there without being attached to anything... to hide or to seal something lying behind it? I move them as gently as possible, revealing a narrow rocky corridor. I enter cautiously. The corridor surrounds me on all sides, but I can stand upright. It seems to be more even than the passages I have gone through so far, no doubt laid by human hands..... I have no choice but to move straight ahead, my heart beating...

I stub my toes on something lying in the way. Some sort of flat object. Further away, higher up, another one... a staircase carved into the rock. I climb the regular steps with great caution, before bumping into what appears to be a second door. I push it gently to see if it opens, but the wood has become so rotten that it gives way immediately with a sickening crack. A pile of bits of plank and unidentified objects fall to the ground, making an infernal racket. My nose is filled with a musty-smelling dust and I have to go back down a few steps in panic, sneezing wildly. I'm struck by a terrible thought: have I just committed an unforgivable archaeological sin? What if I just broke a wooden sarcophagus, destroying the mummy within? I would have desecrated a sacred place and ransacked a major discovery!

Once the din is over and objects have stopped falling to the floor, I try to regain my composure. The budding archaeologist inside me got carried away with the idea of discovering one or several mummies, decorated with incredibly precious funerary objects. I systematically clear a path up the steps and climb up, taking stock of what I find. It appears to be pieces of fabric, folded long ago, and which has a tendency to disintegrate into lint... I put them to one side. Here, pieces of a ceramic object, most likely clay. There, a cracked wooden goblet. For now, no bones, bandages, canopic jars or amulets. Just some rather banal everyday items. Someone obviously lived here in the past. Wow, what secrets will I discover further inside?

I feel like Howard Carter. It's the 26 of November 1922, and I want to scream in despair. After a huge number of unsuccessful excavations in the Valley of the Kings, the final season of scheduled excavations ends today due to a lack of funds. When all of a sudden, a *fellah* screams as though he were possessed by the *Sha*, the dreaded jackal-headed demon. The peasant's pick just hit a block of stone. He kneels down, clears the sand from the smooth block, and reveals a second block below... These are the steps leading to the untouched, eternal resting place of Tutankhamen, with his gold sarcophagus and his fabulous undamaged treasures.

Hmm... I doubt that we will be exhibiting the results of my "fabulous" discovery at Cairo's Egyptian Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, at the British Museum in London or at the Louvre in Paris. It must be an old peasant's or shepherd's shelter, judging by the rather spartan furnishings of this tiny cave. A mattress of woven reeds crumbling into dust, a wooden stool that falls apart when I push it, and an earthenware jug that breaks when I accidentally knock it with my foot. I feel so stupid! I let out a sigh of disappointment as huge as the Cheops pyramid, and shove the debris of the stool and the jug against the rock wall with my foot. I smile at the thought of a new Indiana Leyla Jones discovering this cavern one day; she would at least avoid tripping on this debris!

I cannot wait to leave this cavern now. When I tell my misadventure to my fellow students and even to John, we will have a good laugh and drink very black, very sweet tea. The day my name becomes legend (a legend that I hope will exceed even that of Alexander the Great) is clearly not today. I sigh and am about to head back down the stairs when my heart suddenly lurches. A menacing snake emerges from the depths of the darkness, his famished head rearing up over his immense body. I scream in terror and recoil deep into the cave. I'm trapped!

My heart pounding, I watch the snake's scales sliding over the stone steps. When he enters the cave, I will have to face him, kill him before he is able to bite me. Unfortunately for me, I think I recognise a Naja Haje judging by his swollen, disc-shaped neck. The Egyptian cobra can grow to over eight feet long and has formidable neurotoxic venom. If he manages to sink his fangs into me, first my respiratory muscles will become paralysed and then...

I don't want to die! I scan the walls of the cave with the beam from my torch, looking for something to protect myself or to attack the Naja. I doubt that I'm faster than him, especially as I have no weapon to attack with. I would need a club, but I can't see anything like that here. Maybe a heavy blanket to throw over him, blinding him and giving me time to escape down the stairs. But the pile of cotton lint will not do..... I look around the cave anxiously. I have to find a way to get rid of the monster, and quickly!

Something just moved, or maybe it was a shadow from the irregularities in the rock, in a



recess in the cave. I point my torch in this direction, trembling. If the Naja came with his family, from his great-grandfather to his slew of cousins and second cousins, I'm really screwed!

I step back, grab a shard of the jug that I broke and grasp it firmly like a dagger. I mumble,

"I... I... Is someone there?"

Of course there is no reply. What was I hoping for? I'm so terrified that for once I wish Prince Charming would appear from nowhere astride his white horse to slice off the head of the Naja and its family with a single blow of his sabre! I tighten my grip on the jug shard and walk towards the shadow dancing on the rock. Some instinct, no doubt a superstitious one, prompts me to thrust it into the shadow, in case it is something living. My makeshift dagger does not pass through rock, but some sort of hanging of the same colour. In removing the shard, I tear it to shreds. Is there an exit hidden behind this hanging?

I glanced towards the stairs, still no cobra in sight. Quickly, I push the tattered hanging to the side and move towards what I hope will be an exit, but what I discover leaves me speechless. I certainly won't find any terrestrial aid if I venture any further, but perhaps some divine help, if only I had faith. For, hidden behind this curtain is one of the most incredible temples of ancient Egypt! A cave with its walls and vault covered with painted bas-reliefs representing the ancient gods in the characteristic profile/three-quarters/front view. Under the rays of the divine solar disc Ra, I recognise Horus, the falcon-headed incarnation of the sky and the sun; Anubis, the jackal-headed god who protects the dead; the ibis-headed Thoth, the moon god and protector of scribes, and many others, mainly depicted in scenes where offerings were being made... It's breathtaking!

One of these gods seems to be particularly singled out due to the number of offerings made to him, such as jars of oil, lotus, bushels of grain, perfumes and so on. But this god is represented by a simple human mummy, standing upright and wearing the skullcap and breast-plate of a scribe... Ptah, of course, patron god of artists and therefore of the "sânkh", he who gives life, the sculptor who created this incredibly life-like artwork... Then my gaze is captivated by a woman with a sublime body and face, and who is wearing a crown; she really reminds me of someone... I feverishly decipher the hieroglyphics engraved above it.....

"Nefertiti", which means "the beautiful one has come"...

My hands won't stop shaking. I can't believe what I have discovered. Could this be the cartouche of Nefertiti, the queen whose beauty was legendary??? I look for a depiction of her husband, Akhenaten, the pharaoh at whose side she reigned over 3,300 years ago. But he's missing from the bas-reliefs. That's when I make out the small hieroglyphics under the feet of the queen indicating the name of the *servant of Ptah* the sânkh Ptahmose...

My mind races, imagining an impossible love story between a humble sculptor and the most inaccessible of queens, when suddenly the light from my torch starts to show the

first worrying signs of faintness, bringing me brutally back to reality. I must, and I am the only one who can, show the world this historic discovery. But what happens if I were to die from a cobra bite? I put away the now useless torch, slip the shard into a pocket of my jeans and tear down what remains of the curtain. Breathing deeply, I march into the darkness towards the stairs, ready to blind the animal before stabbing wildly at it...

A surreal and wavering light penetrates a crack in the rock vault, casting a beam of light onto the face of the motionless cobra... It has not moved a single scale! I shake my head to chase away the dizzy feeling of incomprehension that is overwhelming me as this strange phenomenon takes place before my very eyes. As though hypnotised, I watch the light intensify slowly, moving down the body of the snake, becoming orange, then yellow and then fade, plunging the cobra's form into an ultimately reassuring semi-darkness. My legs suddenly give way beneath me and I find myself sitting on the steps, overcome now with reaction. This light must be that of a new day, and the snake a painted etching in the rock wall along the staircase. But how could a painting create such a realistic impression and make me believe that the cobra was alive? The artist who painted it must have noticed this luminous phenomenon and used it to convey a message to whoever passed through here, but what? And why a snake?

I drop the hanging and the terracotta shard, now become useless, and slowly walk down the steps towards the harmless snake. In monotheistic religions, the snake is a symbol of evil. You only have to look at what happened to Adam and Eve when they listened to the serpent's temptations... But in other beliefs, snakes represents immortality, infinity, the underlying forces that lead to the creation of life... For the ancient Greeks, the ouroboros, the serpent eating its own tail, was the symbol of self-fertilisation and constant renewal. As for the Egyptians, they revered the Uraeus, the sacred cobra, as the protector of the pharaohs. As did the farmers, as snakes got rid of insects and mice! This message is a bit too subliminal for me. How will I be able to work it out? As I stand in front of the cobra, staring at me with its menacing eyes flecked with green and gold, an Egyptian legend that scared me so much as a child comes back to me. It is the legend of an evil serpent, the master of the hostile forces rebelling against the world order, the terrible Apophis.....

Each morning, the immense snake Apophis would attack the celestial boat of Ra, the sun god, in the hope of preventing it from reaching its destination. Isis used all of her magic to rob Apophis of his senses and to disorientate him. Ra's cat, Bastet, cut him into pieces with a large knife. Set attacked him with his harpoon. The defenders were victorious and the horizon was tinted red with the snake's blood. Nevertheless, Apophis never ceased to fight back. At noon, he would drink all of the water in the celestial river to immobilise the sun god's convoy. But fortunately, Ra's followers forced him to spit out the precious liquid and, at night, the snake's blood once again flooded the horizon to the west.

I believe that a universal message lies behind this legend from the time of the Pharaohs. If Apophis is constantly defeated but never completely destroyed, then his existence must be part of the universe. It reminds us of the fragility of the universal order, that it is necessary to keep going in order to prevent the forces of Chaos from taking over. Ooh, I'm becoming a bit philosophical, that's not like me! In any case, imagining Ra sending

Apophis back into the shadows calms me down and, in the pale and dim light now seeping through the crack in the cave roof, I climb back up the stairs, determined to put the shelter back as it was. Not out of fussiness, like when I polish aunt Wadiha's beauty salon at closing time, but out of respect for archaeological principles. When the "bosses" come to examine my discovery, they will find the place looking as close as possible to what it was like when I first entered here. I'll try to put the hanging back up.

When I tore the hanging down, I remember some stones scattering over onto the ground. At the time, I was only thinking of the cobra and not about how I would put the hanging back up. I take a closer look at the fragment that is still hanging to understand how those who put up the hanging managed to do it. At the same time, I run my hand over the pediment of the entrance archway and the fragment hanging down from it. It looks as though a groove was cut into the rock, the end of the curtain was held above it and then spikes made from rock and wood were driven into the groove using a mallet. Hey, it looks as though there's a recess beneath the hanging, at the end of the archway... I slide my hand under the hanging and discover a sort of alcove hewn into the rock. If I'm lucky, I'll find the three tools used by *sânkhs*: a wooden mallet, a copper chisel and a polishing stone. I stand on tiptoe and grope around inside the alcove. But I quickly understand from the texture of what I find that I will not be able to use it for chiselling. I'm disappointed, but out of curiosity I pull it out of the niche anyway. Oh my! It's a roll of parchment or papyrus, the edges slightly eroded.

I am well aware that you should never handle this sort of material without taking great care, including moistening and flattening it beforehand, but I'm too excited and start to unroll the crisp sheets. The first faded letters look like Greek, Ancient Greek I think. Oh damn, why did I learn to read hieroglyphics and not Greek! Never mind, I'll leave it to the experts. I reluctantly put the roll back into its niche, fold up the hanging at the foot of the arch and leave the cave with a last look at Ra, the sun god, hoping that he will illuminate my path.

I go back the way I came in. First standing, then on all fours and slithering like a snake, mimicking in reverse the growth of an infant into a child then into an adult...

When I finally leave the succession of passages and caves and can stand upright once more, I am greeted by a victorious dawn. I breathe deeply and welcome the reawakening of the valley. After the oppressive darkness of the passageway, I revel in all the colours of the valley; hues that are sandy, ochre, and of rock and foliage. Looking up I can make out a series of backlit ridges, cut out against the rising sun. Do I have enough strength to climb that far, just to get an idea of where I am? I have to find the road that passes by the Coptic monasteries still in operation. Once there, I will find a way to contact the archaeological team in Alexandria; they must be worrying about what has happened to the intern. And I will let the University and my archaeology professor know about my discovery. They will surely know which national antiquities service I will need to speak to in order to both unveil and protect this historical site. And I will ask John to come pick me up in his old Simca. And maybe the good monks will offer me something to eat!

I begin my slow ascent towards the ridges when a neighing sound breaks the rocky silence of the mountains, until now only interspersed with the miniscule scuttlings and humming of insects. I stop dead and look around for a white shadow, but I can't see anything through the curtains of acacias and rocky outcrops. I start my lullaby again, hoping to call the mare to me and another neigh soon breaks out again. I head towards the source of the neighing sound, watching out for the slightest movement of the rocks beneath my feet, for the least sign of vegetation being rustled too abruptly. And my patience is rewarded as I find her in a clearing, half-hidden by a boulder. It was as if she was waiting for me, as if she knew I would come, *Amira* my princess. Shuddering, she takes a few steps to her side and I notice she is limping on her left hind leg. I decide not to move, to give her time to build her confidence. She hesitates, spins around, takes a few steps back, but my melody encourages her to get closer, inch by inch. I close my eyes. She is very close to me now. Her breath tickles the palm of my outstretched hand. I feel the whiskers on the tip of her nose as she sniffs me. She steps back, come near again. Ouch!" She's chewing my hair, undoing what remains of my bun and I struggle not to move as she breathes against my neck. Um, I think she's licking the sweet syrup stuck to my shirt and I try not to move despite the tickling. I gradually open my eyes and meet her gaze, her eyes examining me curiously. Slowly, I move my hand up her neck and stroke her gently. She trembles, but does not run away. I grow bolder and stroke her cheek, her forehead, the tip of her nose. She bends her neck slightly and suddenly butts me slightly with her head, anxious, before taking a step back and watching me out of the corner of her eye, her head stretched skywards.

"I won't hurt you, *Amira*, princess of the moon. Come here," I say, holding out my palm to her again.

I carry on humming and after a moment she shakes her head, comes towards me again and allows me to stroke her.

"That's good, you're a good horse," I say, stroking her neck.

Little by little, I slide my fingers along her back, her sides, resting one of my hands on her rump, the other moving down her left hind leg; her hoof is barely on the floor. I can't feel a wound or any swelling until I touch her fetlock, causing her to bend her leg and move away from me, on her guard again. I begin encouraging her again, she comes back to me and I cajole her repeatedly until she bends her knee and allows me to hold her pastern and lift her hoof. After a few attempts, she agrees to rest her pastern in my palm. I think that she has never been shod. I notice a sharp stone embedded in her sole, in the middle of the frog. Gently, I manage to pull it out. The mare kicks out slightly in surprise, causing me to let go of her hoof. She darts off and gallops in a circle before slowing to a trot, astonished that she can walk without limping. She returns to breath down my neck and I

stroke her back, happy to have been able to help her. Then she runs off again and trots towards the trees, turning to me as if inviting me to follow her. She advances, waiting for me to catch up with her every now and again, until we have left the area of trees and rocks that seem to be her territory. Then she moves behind me, pushing me in the back to get me to move forwards. After passing a barrier of tamarisk branches, I find myself at the edge of a desert of sand and small rocks. When I encourage her to continue down the road with me, she tosses her head, stepping backwards. And then she suddenly rears up as though to say goodbye, before trotting off back to her territory. With a heavy heart, I watched her go until she disappears from view. I let out a long sigh and wonder why she has guided me so far, only to abandon me now. I turn back to the panorama in front of me and let out a cry of surprise as I can see traces of human habitation far off in the desert. It must be the valley with the monasteries!

I remember what my Uncle Maroun, Aunt Wadiha's husband, told me about the Coptic monasteries in this valley. Thousands of Christians fleeing persecution from the Romans during the third and fourth centuries sought refuge here in the Wadi el Natrun, including Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, who were fleeing the soldiers of King Herod before continuing on the way to Cairo. This valley became the birthplace of Christian monasticism, and in the caves that dominate the desert, these exiles survived by feeding on the scarce resources of a few neighbouring oases. Afterwards they built monasteries to practice their faith in secret. From the numerous invasions up until the great plague of the 14th century, the monasteries somehow held strong. Only four remain active today and almost 200 monks still live there, following in the footsteps of the Old Testament hermits and coming to the desert to meditate and pray... From east to west, there is Saint Macarius (Abu Maqar), Saint Bishoy, the Syrian Monastery (Deir el-Suryan) and the Monastery of al-Baramus (Deir al-Baramus). They are located a few miles from each other, but each monastery is self-sufficient, hidden behind the fortified walls that protected them from Bedouin attacks during the Middle Ages.

I walk through the ochre sand interspersed with rocks that separates me from the nearest monastery. Then I approach some sort of small village, where I can begin to make out gardens and mud-brick buildings. I walk down the narrow streets that soon lead me to the entrance of the monastery, where absolute silence reigns. I hesitate a moment before moving forward into the deserted courtyard, lined with palm trees. Why is there no sign of life? Wait. If I remember correctly, when they are not engaged in purely religious activities, don't the monks spend their time working, weaving mats and baskets, pressing olive oil, cultivating vegetable gardens and other tasks? Maybe they're all in the middle of praying and I have come at the wrong time. But I have to find someone who can help me!

I walk further into the courtyard. I spot five chapels. One of these buildings particularly captures my attention and I head over to it. I am struck by the simple beauty of its architecture, with its arches and round domes of a modest height, and of a very mellow appearance, the same colour as the desert sand. I walk through an open wooden door and enter into soft gloom pierced by rays of light shining through small openings in the walls and domes. I admire the round walls and ceilings decorated with religious frescoes.

Although I am not religious, I am overwhelmed by the powerful spirituality emanating from this place...

Then I notice a pair of men's sandals to the side of the entrance, covered in dust. Out of respect for what I assume to be a local custom, I take off my shoes and walk slowly towards the back of the church, into the quire. And that's when I notice, at the foot of a large stone altar, a black form lying on the ground. It must be the monk to whom the sandals belong. He is prostrate on the cold floor after the manner of the first Christians. I can't help thinking that this prayer position is much like that practiced by Muslims. I do not dare disturb him, so I stand a few feet away from him, waiting for him to get up. At this point, my empty stomach decides to make a disgusting gurgling sound, breaking the silence of the church and startling the poor prostrate monk. I'm so ashamed that I don't know what to do next!

"Ex... Excuse me, *Abouna*, I don't want to disturb you..."

The monk stretches out, stands up and crosses himself before the great Coptic cross and the icons on the altar before turning slowly towards me. In his long black robe, and with his thick black beard, only his green, fervent eyes stand out under his bushy eyebrows in this darkness.

"Visits to Saint Bishoy are forbidden during Lent. Did you not see the sign at the entrance?"

I feel as bad as if I had been asked a question in class and had not learned my lesson... I try to hold back the floods of tears and mumble,

"I... It's just..."

The monk shakes his head and heads towards the exit.

"I will walk you out. You must wait for the end of Lent before coming back."

"But father, *Abouna*, I had an accident on my scooter, I've walked for miles, I haven't slept, I discovered a cave with paintings of Egyptian gods and hieroglyphics, it must be incredibly old, there are also old manuscripts and I have to tell my university and I broke my phone!"

At these words, the monk stiffened, turned around and pierced me with his strange green eyes, flecked with gold.

"You haven't told anyone?"

I shake my head and my stomach gurgles again as my legs almost give way under me. Then the monk comes towards me and with obvious reluctance grabs me by the elbow, and helps me to walk.

"I am brother Zacharias. I will take you to the refectory where you can get something to eat. There are no telephones here. You will explain what you discovered to me and to me alone."

I let myself be carried away, too weak to think. And too weak to chase away the image of the cobra's threatening eyes overlaid onto those of brother Zacharias...



In response to my surprise at not having met with any other monks on our journey to the dining hall, I was given an explanation in a doctoral and almost contemptuous tone.

“My brothers are gathered in their cells. Lent is a long path of asceticism and prayer that leads into Easter, when we welcome and celebrate the joy of the resurrection.... During these forty days, fasting helps us to purify ourselves, lightens our burdens and helps us refocus on what is essential.”

Surely he's not going to make me feel guilty for stuffing myself in front of him! Fortunately he leaves me alone at the table under the vaulted roof of the monastery's rather austere refectory, with a plate, a glass and a jug of water in front of me. I devour the hunk of bread, goat's cheese and dates that Brother Zacharias generously offered me. Ooh, I feel so good. And now I should probably take a nap. But when he reappears, carrying a large goatskin bag and a walking stick under his arm, I realise that naptime will have to wait...

Is it Brother Zacharias's magnetic gaze, the blunt authority that emanates from him, or the feeling that I owe him something for the meal he gave me that prevents me from protesting? I have no desire to walk back towards the cave I discovered, but I feel that I don't really have a choice. I console myself by telling myself that the sooner it's over, the sooner I can leave here...

The journey seems endless and every second I fear that I will get lost... I can feel Brother Zacharias's inscrutable gaze burning into the back of my head and I'm struggling to rid myself of the unease it causes me. I think that I have found the dry wadi and I enter it, pushing branches and bushes aside. But I stumble, slipping down on my bottom and ending up in a small copse. The moon princess appears before me like an apparition. Waves of happiness wash over me; I could stay here and gaze at this beautiful creature for hours. But an arm grabs me roughly, forcing me to get up. The mare flattens her ears, advancing menacingly towards the monk as though to protect me. Brother Zacharias raises his walking stick and hits it against the branches between him and the mare shouting,

“Go away! Get out of here!”

As she doesn't seem willing to yield, he quickly bends down, picks up a stone and throws it with all his strength at the mare who lets out a whinny of pain before fleeing. I am mad with rage and get up to face the monk.

“Hey! Leave her alone, she hasn't done anything! You want to stone her like some barbarian or something?”

The hatred in the monk's eyes makes my blood run cold. But in a split second he manages

to compose his features into an almost dignified expression.

“This stray horse breaks into the crops we work so hard to grow. It is my duty to chase it away. Come, let us continue.”

I swallow my rage and hurry on along with the wadi. We find ourselves in front of the entrance to the painted cave. Brother Zacharias puts his bag on the ground and takes out a large flashlight. Before he shuts it again, I am dumbfounded at seeing something that resembles a large walkie-talkie. Could it be a satellite phone? Unless I'm imagining things, he could have at least offered to let me use it to tell my family what happened! Although actually my parents are celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary in Hawaii and would have a teeny bit of trouble coming to get me, but he isn't to know that. It's just not how you do things, I can't believe it! But I don't have time to say anything to him as he has already plunged into the passage...

I follow behind him and it's time to crawl again, but it's much easier now that Brother Zacharias' powerful torch beam is guiding us. And now we are in front of the carved stone staircase. The monk takes some latex gloves from his bag and tells me to wait here while he goes to examine the cave. I am frustrated at not being able to admire the frescoes again, but I have no authority over the man. While he rediscovers what I found, based on all the details that he got out of me during the journey, I look at the painted Naja, brooding over my resentment for what seems like an eternity... Then I stroke the painted scales out of curiosity. The painting is rather cracked, leaving a very faint trace of pigment on my fingertips. I focus on the details of the artwork; each scale has been carefully painted. I discover some fine carving, the natural shape of the rock accentuating the 3-D effect. The ribbed, swollen throat. The finely carved fangs. My fingers move up to the eye that looks so similar to the monk's eye. My fingertips sense a different material under the Naja's pupil. I rub a little harder and the paint crumbles away, revealing some sort of hard veneer. Trembling, I use my fingernail to scrape away the rest of the paint, freeing up a bronze triangle with an irregular base, as if it had been broken off. I finish pulling it out with my fingernails and quickly slip it into the pocket of my jeans as the light of the torch appears at the top of the stairs. Brother Zacharias comes down the steps, shaking his head and muttering, seemingly distressed.

“The best kept secrets are hidden in plain sight... What could that mean? Will these documents reveal the key?”

Without even noticing me, he slides a digital camera into his bag, shortly followed by his latex gloves... As though haunted by what he has seen, he heads towards the exit and I have no choice but to follow him.

He leads me back through the mountains until we reach a paved road, without uttering a word. Not long after, he gestures to a cart pulled by a donkey. The driver stops, kisses the hand of the monk, who blesses him in return, and asks him to drop me near the desert highway so that I can hitchhike to Alexandria.

“*Bi amrak, Abouna*, at your service, Father.”

Brother Zacharias squeezes my shoulder with Herculean strength and fixes his cobra-like eyes on mine.

“The cave is on the monks’ territory. I would like you not to talk about it to anybody until we have prayed and re-examined the place. Give me your contact details and I will get in touch when the time comes to reveal this discovery to the scientific world and I guarantee that you’ll get your share of earthly glory. But until then...”

It’s true what they say. Appearances can be deceiving. He squeezes my shoulder more tightly to make his threat clear, but his good-natured smile and the cross around his neck conceals this from the eyes of the kind driver, whose toothless mouth curls into a contented smile. I swallow and hurry to climb into the back of the wagon, packed with freshly shorn sheep wool and dripping with lanolin. I pull the collar of my shirt over my nose, trying in vain to stop the terrible smell emanating from the wool, the sweat of a stressed animal, from entering my nostrils. As the cart moves jerkily down the road, I curl up into a ball and cry tears of fatigue and frustration. I have lost my telephone and my scooter, a psychopathic monk has stolen my discovery and I will never see *Amira* the princess of the moon, ever again...

I must have fallen asleep in the soft wool despite the stench. The cart driver, smiling broadly, taps me on the head to wake me up before showing me a goat trail below the desert highway. I thank him warmly and begin my descent, fighting against the ache in my muscles. I realise that I have no desire to join my colleagues on the excavation site in Alexandria. I just need to take a bath to rid myself of the stench clinging to my hair and clothes and then I want to stuff myself with “sweet kisses”.

I ask if I can borrow the mobile phone of the first car driver who stops at the edge of the motorway and call John to rescue me. There are times in life when you need to go against your principles, and so for once I am willing to accept the help of a Prince Charming...

John didn't even bat an eyelid when I got into his Simca 1000 at the edge of the motorway where I had been waiting. But when I see my reflection in the passenger side mirror, I almost faint. Under a tropical jungle of black hair tangled up with sheep's wool, and looking like I've just been freshly exhumed, I would have frightened even the most terrifying of mummies! In an attempt to forget this horrific vision, I begin to race through the story of my adventures at full speed. But John interrupts me, suggesting that I explain everything once I've calmed down later. He informs me that he has of course notified the archaeologists in Alexandria of the reasons behind my absence before borrowing another student's climbing equipment. He wants to recover the remains of my scooter in order to try and fix it.

"I feel terrible about your accident, Leyla. I should never have offered to tinker with your scooter..."

Although I tell him repeatedly that it was my fault, that I should never have left motorway, John insists on shouldering the blame for my accident. Well, as it appears to be an obsession, I give in and try to direct him to where the scooter landed as best I can. When we park on the side of the small road and John sees the scooter far below, he shakes his head.

"You could have died, and it would have been all my fault!"

"Umm... I'm alive and I'm fine. Do you want me to come down with you to get the scooter?"

"There's no way that I'm going to let you put yourself in danger again!"

Fine! I'll let this boy scout do it alone. I watch him as he gets out his equipment, secures it firmly and begins to climb down the cliff. He first retrieves my helmet and all the things I left on the rocky outcrop that broke my fall, then descends to where my broken scooter is lying at the bottom of the ravine. He ties it to the rope, plants his feet firmly on the ground and hoists it up the hill using his muscular arms. Wow, impressive... All I have to do is grab it and pull it up over the edge of the road and wait for the rescuer to return and help cram the pile of scrap into the Simca.

As we work, our bodies brush against each other several times and I am seized by a strange embarrassment. Shivers run down my spine and I breathe in the scent of his cologne. Simply divine. I watch him surreptitiously, so serious, so dedicated and so... attractive all of a sudden, his hair all tousled, covered in grease, and when he stands up, pushing away a lock of hair with the back of his hand, and his eyes as blue as the South Seas staring into mine, I suddenly want to stay there, slip into his arms, and...

But instead he moves to the passenger side and opens the door for me to get in, like a true

gentleman. Woah, I have to stop with all the fantasies! I jump in the car and we begin our journey to Cairo. I open my window discreetly so that we don't choke to death on my stench and pretend to be asleep so that I can hide from John the way he's making me feel. I think I must have actually fallen sound asleep, because when I open my eyes, the Simca has come to a complete stop in a backstreet cul-de-sac in Cairo.

John leaves me to wake up on my own, disappearing through the door of a building and returning several minutes later, smiling warmly.

"I've run you a bath and fetched you some towels and a change of clothes. You can put your, uh... dirty clothes in a plastic bag. In the meantime, I'll take your scooter to the garage just over there. It's the first on the right. The bathroom's on the left. Please, make yourself at home. I won't disturb you."

I already know what Aunt Wadiha will say to me when I tell her all this:

"You see, I told you, you may well be a young, strong, independent woman, but sometimes it's still good to have a companion you can rely on. I'm sure he's a good boy. Invite him round for dinner!"

But I don't think I'm going to let her subject him to a full-on interrogation. Well, not right now at least... For now, I thank John and rush up the stairs leading to his apartment, eager to clean myself up. I swing the front door shut behind me and discover a nice lounge, a cosy sofa and an Oriental coffee table as well as shelves crammed with novels and books on archaeology. This desk next to the window must be where he works. There are more books here, a high-tech computer with a printer scanner and a study kit of archaeological treasures: brushes, mini picks, measuring instruments, a microscope, notebooks and an arsenal of boxes, sieves, test tubes, slides, tongs and so on. He's obviously really passionate about it and that thrills me. Okay, I'm not going to start rummaging through his house; that would be really rude. I open a door thinking that it is the bathroom, but it's actually his bedroom. I close it quickly, completely embarrassed, and open the next door which is indeed the bathroom. I turn off the tap, spot the towels resting on a stool and glance at the change of clothes. Phew, a large t-shirt and long jogging shorts. What? For a moment I was afraid of finding clothes that belonged to his girlfriend, but glancing at the sink reassures me; there is only one electric razor and just one toothbrush. I shrug and laugh at my ridiculous thoughts, undress and slip into the refreshing hot bath with delight...

Sitting cross-legged on the sofa, I enjoy the *meze* that John has bought for our dinner with undisguised pleasure. It's mad how considerate this guy is. He also cleaned up and got changed and we are now comfortably settled in his living room. Nibbling delicious cheese rolls and puff pastries filled with vegetables and meat, we talk casually about my misadventure, our lives and our interests, and it's really nice to get to know each other like this, outside the university walls. When I talk to him about *Amira*, I discover that he too loves horses.

"How lovely to meet such a princess," he says dreamily.

"Thank you for the compliment!" I tease, "but I am a daughter of the people!"

"I was talking about the mare! Er... But you're not bad either," he adds quickly. "I mean, a wild Arabian thoroughbred horse trusted you. That's so rare, they are so proud and difficult to tame. You know what legend Egyptian riders used to tell? Allah created a horse from a gust of wind. He gave this son of the wind to man, telling him, 'Go, and on his back, you shall enjoy a taste of the delight that awaits you in paradise'."

"*Amira* is the daughter of the wind and the princess of the moon... I would love to see her again!"

We remain silent for a moment, lost in this fairytale. I want to ask him to spend a weekend with my parents. I could show him the oasis that my father has made into a bird sanctuary and that can only be crossed on foot, by boat or on horseback. I can't bring myself to do it, though, perhaps knowing that I would have to accept being called "my chick", "my duck" or other ridiculous bird names in front of John! This moment of silence hovers over us like a flock of doves until John suddenly slaps himself on the forehead, moves over to his desk and opens a drawer. He pulls out an old mobile phone and hands it to me.

"It's my old one. I don't need it any more. If you'd like it... You said that you managed to retrieve your sim card after the accident?"

"It should still be my jeans. I'll go get it. That's really nice of you."

When I return from the bathroom, I must have a bizarre look on my face because John is looking at me, worried.

"What is it, couldn't you find it?"

"Yes I did, but I found this too, I'd almost forgotten about it," I say, handing him the metal triangle that I'd found under the painted cobra's eye and had slipped into the pocket of my jeans. "What do you think it could be?"

John wipes his hands before standing up and walking towards me. He holds the metal

triangle between his fingertips, holds it up to the lamp and raises an eyebrow in surprise.

“Did you notice the signs engraved on it?”

We instantly forget about our dinner and focus on the mysterious triangle. John makes some room on his desk and places the triangle on an illuminated tray covered with a plastic sheet. He pulls out a second chair for me and hands me a brush. I take the triangle and dust away the remnants of coloured pigments, minute bits of dust and fragments of rock. Holding the triangle with fine tongs, I turn it and clean the other side. John collects the debris by rolling up the plastic sheet like a funnel and pouring the small pieces into a test-tube.

“We can analyse these at the university laboratory.”

Then John places the triangle on the tray next to a ruler and takes a photo of the front and the back using his state-of-the-art phone. He transfers the pictures to his computer then sits and stares at the screen despondently for a while before saying,

“Broken... I’m sorry.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s part of something bigger. If I had the whole thing then I may be able to decipher what is engraved on it. You see, in addition to all these geometric shapes surrounding them, these symbols are Greek letters, but they don’t mean anything when they are arranged like this.”

I knew I should have chosen to study Ancient Greek rather than hieroglyphics! But as long as at least one of us knows it... I think intently.

“Sorry for being a fan of the pharaohs and everything, but could your triangle be the top of a pyramid?”

John taps on his keyboard like a virtuoso and makes wild motions with his mouse. He brings up photos of the pyramids of Giza and places the image of the triangle on top.

“No, you see the angle of the tip of the triangle is exactly  $36^\circ$ . It’s much narrower than your pyramids and...  $36^\circ$ ??? That can’t be a coincidence. Unless I’m very much mistaken...”

Oh, he’s going too quickly for me... With a few clicks of the mouse, John takes some measurements of the triangle and places it at the top of a five-pointed star. Either he’s a magician, or I’m really hopeless at geometry. Looking at my baffled face, he asks,

“ $36^\circ$ , the pentagram, Pythagoras, the golden ratio. That doesn’t mean anything to you?”

“I’ve never been a big fan of maths, sorry. All I understand is that this triangle is one part of the puzzle, probably a five-pointed star, engraved with incomprehensible symbols. We only have one piece of the star, and I don’t think that the other pieces were hidden behind the painting of the snake in the cavern. I would have felt them. So, the other piece or pieces are somewhere else, and until we manage to reconstruct the puzzle we won’t be

able to understand anything and our triangle will be as useless as one sock without the other! Oh wise one, do you know where the missing pieces of the star could be?"

"No," replies the genius, "but I'm going to try and find out. I'm not promising anything."

While he focuses on his computer, I pace around the living room, running my hand along the edge of the countless books lining the shelves, enjoying the sweet fragrance of old paper. Perfume, paper, parchment, papyrus... Subconsciously, these associations remind me of the scrolls in the hidden recess in the painted cave and which Brother Zacharias took with him. If only I had kept them! John would have been able to decipher what was written on them, seeing as he knows Ancient Greek, and maybe we would have been able to understand everything! A wave of frustration washes over me and I have a sudden desire to use my aunt's caramel to remove every hair from the monk's body. The image makes me laugh and John stops to see what I find so funny. When I finish explaining, he puts on a terrified expression.

"Torture by caramel... I've never heard of anything so sadistic! Promise me that if you are ever angry with me, you will never wax me!"

Of course not. And I don't see how he could ever make me angry. But the thought of having him at my mercy, lying almost completely naked in front of me, sets off a delightful tingling throughout my body. I quickly shake this image, which is as inappropriate as it is distracting, from my head and focus on what is important: the scrolls. If only there were a way to steal them without getting caught by Brother Zacharias!



“Leyla, come quickly!”

Huh? I had been dozing on the sofa as John continued his research and it takes me a moment to come to my senses. I get up and sit next to him. He seems like he’s in a trance.

“I sent the photo of the triangle to some Greek archaeology research students from international universities. There’s someone trying to reach me urgently on Skype.”

By the time I rush over to John, the face of a young, dark-haired guy has already appeared on the screen.

“Please, listen to me carefully, we don’t have much time. My name is Battushig and I have some urgent information for you. Here in Mongolia, near to Mount Altai, I fell into an icy crevasse and discovered a horse frozen in the ice as well as a metal cylinder that I used as an ice axe. Thanks to my horse Altaïr, my people managed to rescue me.”

I think it has to be some kind of bad joke but Battushig continues his story, his tone completely serious.

“The Ulan Bator Academy of Sciences set up a temporary laboratory close to the crevasse and discovered that the horse had been there for almost 2,400 years. Then they found the rider, also frozen solid, wearing armour identical to that worn by cavalrymen from the Greek army of the time. But that’s when Hannibal Corp took control of operations and transported all of the ‘discoveries’ in their refrigerated aeroplanes to their cryogenic centre in Massachusetts in the United States. A former student from the university who works there told me that the mounted warrior was carrying a bill of exchange and a military pass signed by General Ptolemy in 326BC...”

“THE Ptolemy, the one who became Pharaoh of Egypt?” I ask, suddenly captivated.

“We’re John and Leyla, by the way.”

“Exactly, but that’s not all. I met this man, John Fitzgerald Hannibal, and I still get chills now. He came to Mongolia in his private jet to fetch the cylinder I used as a climbing axe, supposedly to take it to the laboratory at Mount Altai in person. But he actually kept it for himself. This man is incredibly powerful and incredibly dangerous, believe me.”

“What was in this cylinder that was so important?”

“A second cylinder made of bone with a coded message engraved upon it. Thanks to the “network”, Salonqa my... my friend, and Professor Temudjin from my university, I managed to decode it. But only after Hannibal had taken it. I suppose that now he too will understand the engraved message: *‘Horse of Alexander, invincible on thy back shalt bear, a star of immortal power’*. From all the evidence we have gathered, we think that the message is referring to Alexander the Great and his horse Bucephalus. But also to this

five-pointed star, a seal of power that made Alexander invincible.

“A... five-pointed star made of metal and covered in engravings?” asks John.

“Yes, you catch on quickly. The frozen rider was carrying an engraved metal triangle, part of a five-pointed star. Leyla, the triangle you found in the cave is also a part of the star. Look at this photo I put together with the one that John took: it fits into the broken star perfectly. With the triangle now in Hannibal’s possession...”

“I don’t see what Hannibal wants to do with these fragments of the star, Battushig.”

“He wants to find the missing pieces of the seal of omnipotence that Ptolemy entrusted to the riders. They have supposedly been taken ‘very far away’. The first fragment was found in Mongolia, the second in Egypt and I don’t know where the other pieces are. But if John Fitzgerald Hannibal, with the power of his intelligence network, his financial backing and his mastery of the most sophisticated technology, finds them then he will be able to bring them together and reforge the star. Then he will become as powerful and indestructible as one of the greatest conquerors – and dictators – in the world!”

“But how can we stop him?”

“He must not get his hands on them! And that begins with the piece that you have. Can you find somewhere safe to hide it as quickly as possible?”

John and I look at each other, terrified. If Hannibal is some kind of spider that has managed to infiltrate every network of power and information, how can we escape from his web? At this moment, the telephone that John lent me and which now contains my sim card begins to ring from where it lies on the sofa. I rush over to it and John tells me to put it on loudspeaker. It’s a man’s voice on the line, serious and confident.

“Hello Leyla. This is John Fitzgerald Hannibal. You have in your possession an item that is of particular interest to a collector such as myself. I will offer you one million dollars for it.”

I am paralysed, unable to utter a single word. How did this man find me? How does he know that I have the triangle? And he’s offering me one million dollars for it!

“My dear girl,” continues the voice of Hannibal, “it’s an offer you simply can’t refuse. In precisely three hours you will give this object to Brother Zacharias who, in return, will hand you a briefcase filled with cash. Otherwise...”

He hangs up.

On the screen, Battushig’s face has become terribly anxious. He clenches his fists.

“I should have known better. He must have undetectable informants worthy of the American NSA tracking all communications that refer to Alexander the Great. Leyla, John, this man is dangerous. He is prepared to do anything, even the worst things imaginable, to obtain these fragments. I don’t even want to think about what he could do to you and your family if you don’t do what he asks. I’m afraid you have no other choice but to do what he says. Please, don’t take any risks...”



I dwell on my rage during the journey. This man, Hannibal, has immense power and can exercise it as he sees fit, with complete impunity. John and Battushig have made it clear to me that nobody, not even the local police or the American ambassador, would take us seriously. I hate dictators. But like all dictators, who are only human after all, he must have a weakness. I just have to find it and use it against him. But until then I have to give in to him. It makes me want to scream. John, ever the pragmatist, put the triangle into a sample box and slipped this into a small backpack along with a water bottle and other things. He has looked gloomy and has not said a word since we left Cairo.

The monastery of Saint Bishoy looks like a spectral vision under the eye of Osiris, the sun of the night. Under the velvet sky studded with cold stars, the silent buildings take on an ashen colour, fluctuating between grey and tarnished silver. As we wait for a signal in the darkness of the monastery's courtyard, a silhouette suddenly appears from nowhere, materialising out of the shadows like a ghost. I stifle a cry as I recognise Brother Zacharias, the echo of his footsteps absorbed by the clay.

"Did you bring what we asked for?"

His icy, menacing voice makes me shudder. John nods, pointing to his backpack. Brother Zacharias gives him a look as sharp as a scalpel, but John does not flinch, holding his gaze. The monk beckons us to follow him and we cross the yard, passing the Church of the Virgin and the canteen. Then we climb up a narrow staircase that plunges us into darkness. A sepulchral chill causes the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up. Or it could be fear. John uses the torch function on his phone and Brother Zacharias turns on his flashlight moments later. Hardly reassured by this sudden light, I follow the two men into a dusty, rancid corridor. When he reaches a door, John asks,

"Mister, er, my Father, is this the cave where Saint Bishoy sought refuge?"

"No," responds Brother Zacharias wearily, "these are just oil cellars."

"But didn't they discover manuscripts in these caves in the 19th century that had been brought by the monks fleeing persecution in Syria and Baghdad during the eighth century? The manuscripts that Leyla found in the painted cave, and which you must already have examined, are they from the same period?"

Surprised by the sudden flurry of questions, Brother Zacharias freezes for a moment, scrutinising John with his green and gold eyes, before responding,

"They date back to the end of the third century BC. Why are you so interested in all of this?"

"What is the link between these manuscripts and the metal triangle that Mr John Fitzgerald Hannibal is so interested in?"

The monk's face darkens and it is as though he is speaking to somebody invisible behind us.

"It was written: 'The best kept secrets are hidden in plain sight'..."

He suddenly begins to laugh almost demonically, the echoes reverberating off the walls of the corridor.

"But Lord, you have judged me unworthy of understanding Your message... Sunlight! What that stupid woman..."

Brother Zacharias's hatred washes over me like fiery lava. Yikes, the rage and frustration of this man, more dangerous than a cobra, terrifies me so much that I start shaking John's arm, stammering,

"G... Give him the triangle, John, quickly!"

"No no! If Mr Hannibal promised you one million dollars in return for the triangle, the exchange must be carried out properly! Follow me!"

He walks twitchily down the corridor until he comes to a wooden door locked with a large key. He opens it furiously.

"Do you want to see the cave where Saint Bishoy sought refuge? I insist. The tour is free! There was a chain hanging here which he attached to his hair to stop himself from falling asleep while meditating as he waited for God to send him a vision... A vision!!!"

That demented laugh again. We follow him as he walks deeper into the Saint's cave, picks up a black briefcase and holds out his hand. I can make out a tattoo of a black cross on his wrist, the Coptic cross, deformed by a number of swollen scars. It looks like scarification. It sends shivers down my spine. Without taking his eyes from him, John reaches into his backpack and takes out the box containing the triangle, placing it in the monk's palm. The monk closes his hand over the box and slides it into a pocket. Then quick as a snake, he grabs the briefcase, sprints out of the cave, slams the door in our faces and turns the key, locking us in.

I'm paralysed with fear, but at the same time relieved not be at the mercy of the psychopathic monk. I turn to John with a rather unpleasant thought in my head. Seeing as he's so athletic, why didn't he attempt to stop Brother Zacharias with a judo move, a karate chop or even a headbutt so that we wouldn't be imprisoned like idiots?

As though reading my mind, John holds up his phone.

"I preferred to get him to talk. I filmed his confession."

"Oh yeah? And is that going to help us get out of this prison?"

"No, but we can use it later. Follow me."

John lowers his head and walks towards a recess in the cave, kneeling down in front of it. He pushes open a small wooden door that leads to a second tunnel, much narrower than the first.

“The monks were always prepared for all kinds of invasions back then. They arranged for a way to flee from the monastery discreetly. If you’ll follow me...”

“But wouldn’t Zacharias know that we would eventually find this escape route?”

“Probably. I imagine that he thought he would have enough of a head start to put the money somewhere safe. What wouldn’t you do for one million dollars...”

After half an hour of brisk walking, we leave the low-ceilinged passageway and find ourselves in the cellars of the neighbouring *Deir el-Suryan* monastery. We climb the stairs that lead us to the deserted canteen and emerge in a large courtyard. In the semi-darkness of the night I can make out two tall steeples, the squat tower of Qasr guarding the entrance of the monastery, a white cube with a number of tiny openings. Its lowered drawbridge reminds me of the castles lords built during the Middle Ages. Small domes topped with large trefoil crosses rise up from inside the fortified perimeter wall. More chapels. But where will we find a living soul here, in the middle of the night?

John walks towards one of the chapels enshrouded by tiny flickering lights like candles. The door is open. We take off our shoes, walk into the nave and head to the quire – the Khurus – behind a large wooden archway. Mesmerised, I look up at the frescoes covering the walls and then at a half dome; the colours have faded over time but still radiate a certain majesty. I notice similarities between these prophets, angels, archangels and saints and the Egyptian paintings in the cave, as though the fervour of believers, regardless of what they actually believe in, has remained unchanged throughout the ages. I am brought rudely back to reality by John's elbow in my side, intimating that I should copy him and bow towards a group of frightened monks hidden in the shadows at the side of the Khurus.

“Forgive our intrusion, my Brothers, don't be afraid...”

After listening to John's explanations in his austere office and seeing the recording on his phone, Brother Kyrillos, the head monk, closes his eyes and mutters a prayer. Then he takes a deep breath and stares at us both in turn.

“Our patriarch, Father Tawadros II, must be informed immediately. He will know the decision that must be made with regard to Brother Zacharias and the cave that you discovered. Please give me your phone and wait here for me.

Before our bemused eyes, he heads over to a large icon representing Christ on the cross, his mother Mary on his right and the apostle John on his left. He presses his fingers against Christ's golden halo, the brightest part of the painting, and a hidden mechanism in the wooden panel holding the icon moves to the side, revealing a second room.

I murmur dreamily,

“The best kept secrets are hidden in plain sight...”

When the panel closes behind Brother Kyrillos, John gets up from his seat and takes a few steps to stretch his legs. He stops in front of the icon and takes a closer look. He talks aloud as though he were reciting a lecture on Byzantine art.

“The cross is the link between heaven and earth, the gallows that has become the tree of

life from the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, standing on Golgotha, ‘the place of the skull’. In the cave lies the skull of Adam, the prototype for mankind, the seed buried in the ground that must die in order to bear fruit...”

Suddenly John cries out and rushes towards me, his eyes bulging.

“Leyla, quick, we have to get out of here right away!!!”

“What’s got into you?”

“This secret is hidden in the shadows! The skull has the same ‘H’ logo that Hannibal Corp uses! Brother Kyrillos must be working for them too!”

Then everything happens as quickly as sand flowing out of a broken hourglass. I can hear a humming sound, like a car engine approaching quickly. Rays of light tear through the night and through the office windows, dazzling us. The icon moves and Brother Kyrillos appears from the adjoining room, threatening us with an automatic pistol.

“You should have given the object to Brother Zacharias. But you tried to be clever and he considered you bothersome...”

I don’t understand! I saw John put the sample box in Brother Zacharias’s palm but now Brother Kyrillos is asking for it??? And why is John still so impassive?

“Who is ‘He’? Your patriarch, or dear John Fitzgerald Hannibal?” says John coldly, advancing slowly towards Brother Kyrillos. “How did he manage to corrupt you? Did he promise you some sort of fanciful protection for your minority group? Did he bury terrible secrets that you would never want to see the light of day? Or did he simply buy you with his millions?”

The monk, unsettled by John’s attitude, takes a step backwards.

“It’s useless to resist. Mr Hannibal’s men will be here in seconds to take care of you! Give me the real triangle now and there’ll be no need for any unnecessary bloodshed!”

I feel like a stupid puppet watching this duel that is completely beyond me. What triangle are they talking about?

John slides his hand into the left pocket of his jeans and pulls out a sample box identical to the one he gave to Brother Zacharias. He shakes it, rattling the triangle inside, and continues to walk towards the monk.

“Is this what you want? Fine, you win.”

The monk hesitantly holds out his hand. Just as he’s about to place the box in the monk’s outstretched palm, John moves like lightning: he puts the monk in an arm lock, causing him to cry out in pain and drop the revolver. John throws me the sample box and wrestles with the monk who has managed to escape his grip and is trying to pick up the gun. John kicks the back of his knees, knocking him to the ground. Then he floors him, knocking him out with a single blow to the back of the neck. As orders are being barked out to the armed men jumping from their 4x4s in the courtyard, John grabs me by the hand and



drags me out of the office, leading us towards the back of the building. I finally understand John's behaviour. He was so suspicious that he gave Zacharias a fake triangle! A huge risk, I think to myself, racing to the rear exit of the building where I discover a small courtyard facing the wall. I spot a narrow staircase carved into the wall a few metres away and we sprint towards it. We have almost reached the top when the beam of a mobile spotlight bathes us in light and an icy voice calls out,

"Don't move. You're surrounded. Put your hands up and put them behind your head."

I can see shadows running in our direction. My heart pounding, I climb one more step and a bullet smashes into the rock in front of my foot. Ok, I get it. I slowly do as I was told, but not before glancing at John and then above the parapet. Should we jump?

Shards of stone fly around us as we leap over the top of the perimeter wall. I race after John through the stone and sand towards the trees below us. The slope becomes steeper, leading us to some rather alarming cliff faces. I can hear footsteps running towards me and make a silent prayer to the moon, narrow and tapered like the daggers used by the *Hashshāshīn*, the Persian assassins from the 11th century. If only I had a weapon! And knew how to use it! Silently, John gestures at me to go in one direction while he takes another. I run, zigzagging between the trees and rocks, my pursuers slowly catching up with me on this uneven terrain. One of them, just behind me, shouts breathlessly,

“Stop running or I’ll blow your legs off!”

Carried away by my momentum, I can’t stop running... Shots from behind me shatter the branches, rocks and pebbles around my feet. I hope that John has managed to get away. I can feel tears welling up against my will, blurring my vision. I wipe my eyes furiously and see a white shadow looming before me. Terrified, I stop dead to avoid running into it and realise it is the white mare, the daughter of the moon! Instinctively, I grab her mane with one hand and jump onto her back. Without me needing to ask her, the mare carries me at full speed across the land she knows so well, leaving my pursuers in our wake.

Just when I think I’m in the clear, the light from the headlamps of a 4x4 chasing us cuts through the menacing shadows projected by the branches. Hannibal’s men do not let their prey get away so easily! How will I be able to escape once we’re on open ground?

A luminous snake begins to take shape directly in front of us and I recognise the desert highway. The mare is taking us right onto it! I sit up and urge her to slow down, but she flattens her ears and accelerates even more, racing down the slope and sending clouds of pebbles and dust behind her. The 4x4 has spotted us and is getting dangerously close.

“*Amira*, stop, please!”

She refuses to obey me and continues her course towards the motorway, nostrils flaring with exertion. I could stop everything and save her from the wrath of our pursuers who would not hesitate even for a moment about shooting her. I could jump from *Amira*’s back and surrender, giving her a chance to escape. But for some reason, I choose to trust in my mare’s fierce determination. I hug her neck, bury my face into her silky mane and close my eyes, thinking that my time is up. Either we will crash into the vehicles below us or the weapons of Hannibal’s men will tear us to shreds!

The 4x4 is right behind us. Suddenly I feel my mare’s muscles tense and she leaps into the air. When I open my eyes I discover that I am still on her back. My mare has stopped stampeding and has turned around. In a terrible shriek of metal and steel, our pursuers’ 4x4 crashes into the deep chasm where *Amira* led them. Knowing her territory by heart, only she could have crossed that chasm, soaring like a golden eagle. I begin to shake with

aftershock, but also with an intense and indescribable joy. *Amira* and I, Indiana Leyla Jones, we just made a leap of faith!

I stroke *Amira* for a long time while. snorting loudly, she takes us back to the *Deir el-Suryan* monastery. But just like the first time she took me to the outskirts of *St Bishoy*, she stops before getting too close to other humans. If she could speak, she would tell me her story. But deep down I understand that we must go our separate ways here. I dismount slowly and tenderly embrace the neck of my princess of the moon. She breathes against my neck one last time before retreating a few steps and trotting off proudly, tail up and ears pointed, back towards her wild territory...

“It’s delicious, ma’am, but I’m really not hungry!”

I knew I should never have introduced John to Aunt Wadiha.

“You saved my niece’s life! You’re a hero!”

“No, ma’am, it was the mare *Amira* who was the hero. All I did...”

“I told you to call me ‘auntie’!” interrupts my aunt, pinching his cheek affectionately in the way Egyptians often do to their children. “You are part of the family! So, tell me, how many children are you going to have?”

I don’t know who is blushing more, John or me; we’re both as red as peppers! Okay, we may have had a passionate kiss when we were reunited at *Deir el-Suryan*, but all this talk about marriage and children...

Although maybe I wouldn’t mind in a few years!

But until then, between university classes and recent events, we are going to be very busy. The story of the *Wadi El Natrun* cave is not over yet. According to the leading archaeological experts who had begun examinations of it, the cave was first occupied around 1350BC to 1330BC by Ptahmose, a sculptor during the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaton and his wife of legendary beauty, Nefertiti. He also left a ‘will and testament’, engraved on the walls of the cave. He apparently chose to go into exile far from this queen, who was indifferent to his love, and lived out his days in this valley, most likely going blind judging by the deteriorating quality of the most recent engravings. It’s such a sad story!

The star fragment and the papyrus that belonged to Dimitrios, one of Alexander the Great’s soldiers, have been taken to the secure rooms in the basement of the National Museum in Cairo, awaiting their secrets to be discovered. John and Battushig spend hours online speculating on the star’s incomplete message. As for me, I think mainly of Bucephalus, the incredible horse that carried Alexander so faithfully during his conquests. Let’s hope that Hannibal never manages to track him down!

With the help of Professor Temudjin, Battushig’s “network” is investigating the destinations and routes throughout the world (those that were known back then) that Ptolemy could have ordered the other riders to take in order to keep the pieces of the seal of omnipotence from man’s greed. Mr Temudjin thinks that Hannibal must have followed this same logic and that is the reason he was particularly interested in Egypt, which had been conquered by Alexander during the early years of his exploration. And what better scouts in the finding of clues could Hannibal have asked for than the monks, these experts in the ancient languages, curators of ancient libraries and receivers of confessions?

Speaking of monks, this whole thing has been a fiasco. Brother Kyrillos has been dismissed by the Coptic authorities, shocked after hearing our story and watching the film taken by John in the cellars of *Saint Bishoy*. Kyrillos confessed that he had been corrupted, but as he has taken a vow of penitence, and silence, we won't learn anything from him... Zacharias disappeared without a trace, along with the infamous briefcase containing one million dollars.

Well, I'm alive and we got through it! In order to try and wind down after all this excitement, I invited John to spend a weekend with my parents who have returned very happy from their trip to Hawaii. Rattling along cheerfully in the old Simca, I begin to smile, imagining us crossing the bird sanctuary on horseback, chattering like magpies and cooing like pigeons. Oh no, if this continues, I'm going to end up calling John my "chirpy boyfriend"!

But my smile is to be short-lived. The music on the radio is suddenly interrupted by a special newsflash.

"There was a break-in last night at the National Museum of Cairo. Items of great historical value have disappeared but the museum management is refusing to disclose details. One of the security agents assigned to the night shift in the basements survived the burglars' attack. He is currently in intensive care but his injuries are not thought to be life-threatening."

John's face is horrified. Like me, he understands that this must be the work of Hannibal. We exchange a silent promise that we, the "network" and everyone who agrees to help us, will do everything we can to prevent him from continuing his evil plan!

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