



# ਜੇਪੁਠਿਠਿਠਿ ਠਠਠਠਠ ਠਠ ਗਿਠਿਠਠਠਠ

By

**SIMON COE**

# Justice Told in Nevada

A Novel By

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# dedication

To Louise

**Diamond:** a precious stone formed of carbon; crystallizes in the cubic or isometric system.

On MOH's scale it measures 10, which makes it the hardest of all known substances. Its high refractive index, (2.417), together with its dispersion, (.044), gives it a high degree of natural brilliance and fire. Its specific gravity is 3.52. Its normal color range is from colorless to yellow, although in limited form, it can be found in nearly any color, including black...

*Diamond Cutting*  
by Basil Watermeyer

## introduction

In Saudi Arabia, the Koran is the word and Islam is the only belief. Devout followers pray five times a day and follow the Hanbali code of justice.

On Friday, the holy day, citizens gather in the town square and witness punishment as it is meted out to the offenders of the law. On a raised dais, those who have perpetrated a minor crime are lightly caned—a punishment intended more to embarrass than harm. For those who commit a more serious crime, such as major theft, the right hand may be taken. And for those who are guilty of a felony, such as murder or rape, the head may be taken.

In Saudi Arabia, justice comes on Friday.

## prologue

### THE RED SEA JULY 17, 1914

“Mother of Jesus,” Nicholas whispered hoarsely.

The burly boatswain grimaced and unwound the heaving line from the limp body, then took a backward step and crinkled his nose. He grunted and wiped the palms of his hands on his dungarees, like the black man lying before him was a leper and he could erase the touch of his body.

Captain Theo Stavros knelt beside the body and pressed two fingers against the side of the black man’s throat.

“He’s dead,” he said. The inflection of his voice made him sound as if his mind were elsewhere, probably because he was surprised to find a body floating in these waters. He ran his hand across the two-day stubble of his whiskers and stood erect, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing the back of his neck.

*Where'd he come from?* he wondered. He squinted against the intense glare of the tropical sun, turned and looked east at the Arabian shoreline. There was nothing living in sight, only an endless sandy plain shimmering out of focus with rising heat vectors. A shallow coral shelf extended from the shore for fifteen-hundred meters into the Red Sea, dotted by countless outcroppings jutting a few feet above the surface of the water, some of them large enough to be islands.

Theo turned and looked at the naked body of the black man again. His topaz eyes briefly examined the matrix of healed lash scars on the man's back, then traced the line of his body down to the thick iron shackles around his ankles.

*Amazing.* He was wearing leg irons and it was a good two-mile swim.

The dead body made Nicholas uneasy. He shuffled from foot to foot and the movement brought a sparkle from the gold earring in his left ear. The son of a Bulgarian gypsy, he was extremely superstitious and the corpse conjured an image that made his head tremble. The ringlets of his shiny black hair jiggled as if he had palsy. He knelt and rolled the body over, finding more healed whip scars on the chest and six numbers in Arabic script tattooed across the forehead.

A seaman for thirty years, there wasn't much that stirred Nicholas to the point of emotional display. But the array of nasty scars on the body made the corners of his mouth turn down in distaste. He grimaced as if he sensed the pain this black man had endured, then looked up at Theo.

“What do you think, Captain?”

Theo studied the tattoo on the black man’s forehead. He couldn’t read Arabic script, but he was able to interpret the numerals from the letters—and he knew what they meant.

“He’s an escaped slave,” he said. “Most of the African slavers bring their cargos across the Red sea to Yanbu al Bahr. We’re about forty miles north.”

It was only nine-thirty in the morning, and already the blistering rays of the Arabian sun reflected from the steel deck like the open door of a furnace. Theo noted the body was already dry, yet it had been hauled from the water less than ten minutes ago. He took off his cap and wiped the sweatband with his handkerchief, then patted his bald head and the back of his neck.

There were some primitive tattoos on the black man’s chest, he crouched and studied them briefly. When he noticed one of the man’s hands was locked in a fist, he frowned.

*Strange. Men didn’t swim with fists.*

He pried the fingers loose and two black objects spilled onto the deck. He scooped them up and examined them. They glistened, jet black stones almost identical in size, ten or eleven millimeters in diameter, an odd eight-sided geometric form in shape, resembling two pyramids placed back to back.

Theo was a man with a huge frame; six-foot-three and two-hundred and sixty pounds. When he tried to pick up one of the stones, he found it too slippery for his massive fingers. Instead of persisting, he pushed both of the stones across his palm with his index finger, rolling

them over and scrutinizing them.

*I've seen that shape before, he thought. But where?*

He stood and dropped the stones in his shirt pocket. In the background, a ship's bell sounded three times. Theo glanced at his wristwatch and stared at the shoreline again for several seconds before nodding to Nicholas.

"Nine-thirty," he said. "We should be in Yanbu al Bahr by five, but he'll start stinking before that. Can't just leave him floating in the water. Bad luck. Wrap him in a winding-sheet and sew a shroud, Niko. We'll bury him at sea."

"Aye, Cap'n." Nicholas nodded, the sunlight glinting off his earring as he bent and grabbed the hands of the corpse.

He dragged the body forward to the limited shade offered by a deck winch, then gave some muted orders to two deckhands who stood gawking. They scurried away. Moving the body made him break out in a profuse sweat. He scratched the six-day stubble on his chin and wiped the back of his neck with his kerchief. When he glanced back at Theo, his lips curled and his dark brown eyes narrowed.

*That son of a bitch! I've seen those stones before. They're worth plenty.*

Theo climbed the ladder to the bridge. When he entered the wheelhouse, the lingering aroma of second mate Danos Shapros' Latakia pipe mixture made him lift his nose and sniff. It was pleasant. He paused to check a small blackboard inscribed with the ship's current course, then nodded to the second mate.

“Same course, Mr. Shapros, south by east. Full speed. Keep a sharp eye for coral heads off the port bow.”

“Aye, Cap’n,” Danos replied. He was a short, wiry man with dark features, a well-waxed handlebar moustache, and a bent back—the reward of too many years hauling fish nets by hand. He touched two fingers to the brim of his cap in a loose acknowledgement of the command, then reset the engine telegraph to full ahead.

Theo stood in the port wing of the wheelhouse, watching the bow of the *Athena Star* swing gently toward the south. The body of the slave haunted him. He couldn’t erase the image from his mind. For a brief moment he tried to imagine a scenario that would explain the presence of the dead man, but it was hopeless.

Once again, he stared at the raw Arabian coast looking for signs of life—anything. Where the blue-green water ended, the shoreline blended into a flat barren desert extending miles inland before rising into the foothills of the Hijaz Mountains.

There was nothing.

His mind wandered from the scene, replaying a mental picture of the events following the retrieval of the slave’s body from the water. He remembered the expression in the boatswain’s eyes when he dropped the two stones into his pocket; it wasn’t friendly.

*I’ve never seen Niko like that, what is it?*

Theo waited until he felt the tremors of the ship’s engines settle to a steady rhythm under his feet, then stepped through the chart room into his quarters. He sat at his desk for a moment, organizing his thoughts before

he opened the ship's log and entered the details of finding the slave's body.

The moment made him remember the stones; he took them from his pocket and rolled them across a blank page of the logbook. Even though they were jet black, they glistened as they moved, flashing sharp sparkles. He picked up one of the stones, it was slippery and it escaped his grasp three times before he had a good grip.

*Looks like a piece of shiny coal.* There was a brass paperweight sitting beside the log book he'd purchased it in Bombay, a plated replica of a gold ingot. Something compelled him to draw the stone along the surface of the paperweight. When it sliced through the plating and cut a deep furrow into the brass, his thick, black eyebrows arched in surprise.

He stepped from his desk to the light of a porthole and examined the stone. It was undamaged. He frowned and glanced back at the paperweight, the gouge was obvious, even from where he stood.

*Unbelievable! Nothing cuts metal like that. Except maybe...a diamond?*

Theo's forehead wrinkled with furrows of uncertainty, he looked at the stone again and mused aloud. "A black diamond? Was that possible?"



Three men stood on one of the larger islands, partially shaded and concealed by the low-growing, gray-green shrubbery of a mangrove. All three wore similar

dress: ankle-length white thobes, sandals, and the distinctive patterned gutra of the Hanafi tribe on their heads—a white field covered with a random pattern of black arrowheads. There was a striking similarity in the men; each had a coffee-tone complexion, a trimmed black beard and moustache. The exception was Sheik Abu Hadid ibn Husayn. His beard was flecked with the silver frost of time. The sheik held a pair of binoculars to his eyes and watched the disappearing stern of the ship.

“The letters on the stern say ‘Athena Star’,” he said. “It must be Greek.”

“That’s the same ship,” the man known as Limping Nizam said. “It passes every six weeks and docks in Yanbu al Bahr. It carries supplies for the Turkish garrison.”

The sheik didn’t respond, appearing as if he hadn’t heard the explanation. He kept staring at the ship when he spoke. “How did the slave get on the island?”

The hands of the third man, Hassan, fidgeted with the ends of his gutra headpiece. He glanced quickly at Limping Nizam and licked his lips before answering. “He was part of a slave caravan bound for the Turkish fort at al Fama. They camped on the mainland last night when it became too dark to travel. Sometime during the night he escaped and waded to the island. Limping Nizam found him here this morning.”

The sheik lowered his binoculars and frowned at Limping Nizam.

“Don’t the slavers chain these people?”

Limping Nizam’s eyes darted between the sheik and Hassan several times, he cleared his throat before speak-

ing.

“Yes, Sheik Abu Hadid. The man was wearing iron shackles. Somehow he escaped the slaver’s chains. When I found him, he was crawling out of the fresh water pool carrying a handful of the Tears of Eve. He dropped them when I yelled, then picked up some of them and ran through the mangrove. I followed after him...as best I could.”

He paused and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, accenting his severe limp and trying to draw attention to his misshapen left foot. When he saw the sheik glance at his foot, he continued. “By the time I got through the mangrove he was one-hundred meters off shore, swimming toward the open sea.”

The sheik’s frown deepened, his voice had a hard edge. “You let him escape?”

Light beads of perspiration dotted Limping Nizam’s forehead, he lowered his head and once again shifted his weight from foot to foot. His voice was a whisper, “I can’t swim.”

The sheik held the pressure of his stare briefly then looked back toward the ship. He put the binoculars to his eyes and studied the Athena Star for several seconds before speaking. “You’re certain the ship goes to Yanbu?”

“Only Allah can be certain, Sheik Abu Hadid,” Hassan replied. “But the time for the supply ship is right, and I have seen Turkish caravans being loaded from that very ship in Yanbu al Bahr several times.”

The sheik lowered the binoculars and held them against his chest, still watching the ship. A trio of pesky mangrove flies buzzed about his head, he brushed them

away and glanced at the position of the sun before speaking.

“Hassan, find my son, Yusef. Have him select eight warriors with fresh camels. We must be in Yanbu al Bahr before the moon rises.”



The *Athena Star* was the living prototype of what seamen call a “rust bucket.” Designed as a collier, she was built in Glasgow in 1892, destined to spend her life carrying coal to the ports of the British Isles. But prolonged exposure to northern waters erodes both man and ship, and after fifteen years of enduring the gales and pounding waves of the North Sea, she developed too many problems to be safe in heavy weather. In 1912, she was sold to the Socrates brothers of Athens: coffee and olive merchants.

If the ship were animated, she would have giggled at the transaction. Instead of tossing in the turbulent waters of the frigid North Sea; creaking, straining, loaded to the gunwales with coal, she now sailed placidly in the tepid waters of the Mediterranean and Red seas. Plowing steadily through the gentle sea at seven or eight knots, she repeated the same cycle month after month: five days from Piraeus to Yanbu al Bahr; three days to unload Olives, Rice, and Turkish supplies; ten days to Al Hudaydah; three days to load the aromatic coffee beans of San’ai and Mukha; fifteen days to Piraeus; and five days to unload and reload. A snap.

For Captain Theo Stavros and his crew, the schedule

was a gift: good weather, easy sailing, home briefly every six weeks—a seaman's dream.



The lower orange rim of the setting sun was just dipping into the Red Sea when the *Athena Star* docked in Yanbu al Bahr. Mooring lines were set, rat guards attached, and a general atmosphere of calm settled over the vessel. After the shore watches were assigned, several of the crew left the ship and drifted into the growing shadows of the village. Theo stood on the wing of the bridge and watched the departing seamen, wondering what they did in a port like this. Alcohol was forbidden in this land. There were no bars and no women. Entertainment was limited to a teahouse, a dozen scattered shops in a small souk, two open-air restaurants, and a jail.

Tied to the pier just ahead of the *Athena Star* was an ancient Arab Dhow. Theo had seen many of these craft plying the north-south trade routes of the Red Sea, carrying spices and cloth from Karachi and Bombay. But there were others; old and barely seaworthy hulks that sailed east-west routes across the Red Sea in a cloud of stench—slavers hauling human cargo from the villages of Africa. Theo sniffed the air and crinkled his nose, no question about the cargo of the Dhow.

At eight bells, Theo descended from the bridge, circled the main deck of the ship, checking the rat guards on the mooring lines, then stood by the gangway for several minutes watching the slaves being marched from the

Dhow and assembled along the pier into a caravan. He counted forty of them, mostly men with no clothing, and a few women clad in ragged garments fashioned from burlap remnants.

There were at least a dozen Arab drivers, some with whips, others with long staffs used as prods. They shuffled in silence through the shadows of flickering torches, hooded specters in long caftans, their features hidden from view as they chained their human inventory from neck-to-neck.

For Theo, there was an undercurrent of horror in the moment. The heavy night air carried an overwhelming sense of despair. He swallowed hard and looked away. Somewhere in the shadows a whip cracked, there was a muffled cry and shuffling feet moved in cadence to the clank of dragging chains. The human dirge stumbled reluctantly along the dusty pier, headed for a holding area at the edge of the village. At dawn, the group would join a larger caravan and be marched to the trading docks at Yanbu al Nakl, fifty-five kilometers inland.

When he could no longer hear the sounds of the chains, Theo left the ship and walked slowly along the short pier to an assembly area where unloaded goods were transferred to the backs of animals for transport. The moon had risen. As he passed by the animal pens, he could see the silhouettes of several Arab guards—silent sentinels in gutra headpieces watching over the donkeys and camels that would be loaded the following day with the cargo resting in the holds of the *Athena Star*.

He wound his way through dark alleys formed by buildings that were biblical in structure. They were crude

mud brick with wooden panels covering square window openings. An open trench filled with human waste traced along one side of the alley; carefully he avoided stepping into it. Every three or four years it rained in Yanbu. If the rain was heavy, the ditches would be flushed into the Red Sea. If not, maybe next year.

Theo paused at the edge of the village square. On one side, he could see the flickering flames of the perimeter torches marking the seating area of the teahouse. The boatswain, Niko, sat at a table with two of his shipmates; their heads together in a guarded conversation. Theo smiled.

*Niko drinking tea; there's a sight to remember.*

On the opposite side of the square, the lanterns and torches of the souk added amber warmth to the night. A few people milled about the stalls and open shops of merchants. Theo crossed the square and joined them.

He stopped at the wheeled cart of a fruit vendor and purchased a kilo of oranges, and a small bag of the fat, red dates native to this part of the Arabian coast. The aroma of spices from the adjoining stall drifted past his nose: cinnamon, cloves, open sacks with reddish-brown cakes of heady myrrh, bundles of sandal wood, sacks of pungent cardamom seeds. He stood for a moment, sniffing the air and watching a merchant blend spices for a customer, then moved along to the next stall where the merchant had posted a small sign: *English and French spoken.*

The merchant was ancient, an old man with wrinkled, brown skin and snow-white hair plaited into two braids which trailed down the back of his threadbare,

brown mishlah. He sat cross-legged on a small carpet next to a lantern, with a large wash pan in his lap. The pan was half-filled with a sawdust-like material, which he used by the handful to polish small pieces of rose quartz. Sitting on the carpet, and forming an arc around him, were over a dozen small containers, each holding a different type of gemstone. Directly behind him, an oriental carpet hung suspended as a curtain, concealing the back of his stall. About two-dozen strings of worry beads were attached to the wool pile of the carpet, each strand fashioned from a different type of gemstone.

The knuckles of the old man's hands were swollen with the effects of time and arthritis. Theo watched his labored movements with fascination for several minutes, then knelt beside him. The old man looked up at him and slipped his red-and-white gutra from his head, resting it around his neck. He nodded and a gentle smile formed a thousands cracks in his weathered features, his brown eyes twinkled with life.

"Ahlan Sadiki," (welcome friend) he said.

"English," Theo said. "You speak English?"

The old man nodded and gestured toward the display on the hanging carpet. "Perhaps you'd like a set of worry beads. My prices are very fair."

Theo shook his head and sat on the carpet beside the old man. He watched an Arab woman shuffle past, her body covered from head to foot by a black chodor. He waited a moment then glanced down the lane to see if there were other pedestrians.

The lane was empty except for two Bedouins who stood in front of the neighboring stall with their backs

toward him. They wore long, black riding abayias; their gutra headpieces were different from what most of the Arabs wore; they were white covered with a pattern of black arrowheads. Feeling certain the men weren't watching him, Theo dipped his hand into his shirt pocket and withdrew one of the black stones. He kept the stone in the palm of his hand and held it in front of the old man.

"Perhaps you can tell me about this," he said.

The old man's jaw muscles tightened as if he'd been stuck with a pin, his head snapped up and he shot rapid glances to the left and right. He covered Theo's hand with his and made a rapid gesture with his eyes toward the two Bedouins standing at the next stall. When he spoke, his voice was loud enough to be heard by anybody within twenty feet.

"Yes, I have many worry beads made from Coral. I keep them in the back of my shop."

He got to his feet and held aside the carpet, gesturing to Theo to step ahead of him. The area behind the carpet was small, there was a larger carpet covering the ground and a small lantern and some boxes stacked in one corner. The old man motioned Theo toward the lantern and held a finger to his lips, but remained at the hanging carpet, peering through a crack at the side. He stayed there for fully five minutes after Theo had seated himself, watching as if his life depended on vigilance.

When he crossed the carpet and sat beside Theo, the tension was clear in his eyes. Once again, he held a finger to his lips, then leaned close to Theo and whispered. "You carry death in your hand."

Theo frowned, held out his hand and looked down at the stone. "I don't understand."

The old man reached forward and closed Theo's fingers over the stone, then lightly patted his hand. "The black stone is a curse, show it to no one."

Again, Theo frowned. He held the old man's gaze for a moment, then dropped the stone into his shirt pocket. "You must be able to tell me more than that."

Once more, the old man held a finger to his lips. He stood and shuffled to the hanging carpet, then peered through the crack for a long moment before returning. He kept his voice at a whisper; the expression in his eyes reflected his discomfort. "The stone is one of the Tears of Eve. In another country, it is of great value. But here in Hijaz, it can cost your head."

Theo held the old man's eyes for a long moment, then smiled at him. The sense of mystery stimulated him. He leaned near the old man and whispered low. "Can't you tell me why?"

The old man shook his head as if he were dealing with a persistent child. He looked down at the carpet for a brief moment, then vented a long sigh. "The stones are diamonds, they..."

"But they're black." Theo's voice was loud enough to cause the old man to shake his head and place a cautionary finger across his lips.

"That is Allah's prank to mislead the unwashed. Beneath the black veil hides the rarest of gems—a colored diamond. Allah has touched each crystal and stained it with the most brilliant of hues; Red as fiery as the setting sun, or blue as deep as the clearest of skies, or possibly

green, or violet, or magenta—whatever the tone, each stone glows like the fires of creation when the black veil is removed.”

The old man stepped to the carpet once more, peering through the crack for a long moment, then returning his attention to Theo.

“Take my warning seriously, those stones can cost your head. Most of the western coast of Arabia is occupied by the Turks: they control it loosely. But in Hijaz, they choose to place the powers of administration in the hands of a puppet, Husayn Ibn Ali, the Grand Sharif of Mecca. They have made him King of Hijaz and given him large tracts of land in the north.

“Somewhere north of Yanbu, on these lands of King Husayn, is a secret place called ‘The Mother Eve’. The tears of Eve come from there. The Husayn’s tribal brothers, the Hanafi Tribe, guard the lands. They are vicious warriors. Anyone caught with one of the ‘tears’ is immediately sent to Allah...minus his head.”

He shuffled to Theo’s side, sat, reached forward and placed a hand on the seaman’s wrist.

“I hear a whisper of Allah,” he said. “It tells me you are a good man and I must help you. The two men standing in front of the next shop are Hanafi Tribesmen. You cannot let them see you. Leave through the back of this stall, there is a narrow alley leading to the square. Be careful, walk quietly and return to the safety of your ship. May Allah be with you.”

The old man blew out the lantern, stood and held aside the canvas that formed the back wall of his shop. Theo paused to shake his hand, then slipped past the

canvas and into the night.

Theo walked quickly down the alley, his eyes darting from shadow to shadow. When he came to the edge of the square, he stopped and listened for a long moment, his eyes sweeping the perimeter. All was quiet; the moon was high, nothing moved. He stepped briskly across the square and started down the narrow street that passed by the animal pens. He'd gone less than twenty feet when a strange sensation made him stop and turn to look behind. A terrible thud filled his ears and the world collapsed in a brilliant orange flash—then darkness.

Niko, the boatswain, snickered and slipped the blackjack into his rear pocket. He quickly straddled Theo's prone body and went through his pockets. When he found the two stones, he snickered again and stood up, holding them in his clenched fist.

"Now I have my share, you son of a bitch!"

Without a sound, a cloaked figure stepped from the dark shadows and grabbed Niko's clenched fist. Even though the assailant had but three fingers on one hand, his grip was like a steel band. Simultaneously, two more figures appeared from behind Niko. One of them grabbed him about the waist and lifted him while the second figure slipped in front of him and drove his fist into Niko's exposed genitals. Sour tea and vomit spewed from Niko's mouth, strong fingers pried the stones from his hand and a series of blows descended on his head. He was unconscious before his body hit the ground.

One of the dark figures straddled the seaman's body. He pulled Niko's tongue from his mouth and sliced it off with the deft slash of a knife, then picked up Niko's body

and placed him over the shoulder of one of the other men. The three men moved briskly down the dark street and entered the animal pens, where three other figures in dark abayas held the reins of six camels. Niko's hands and feet were bound, his body thrown across the back of one of the camels. As if following a finely choreographed plan, the six men mounted without an exchange of words and followed the lead camel north, toward the desert lands of the Hanafi tribe. From start to finish the event was swift; the abduction of Niko and the flight from Yanbu al Bahr took less than six minutes.

Once clear of the village buildings, the pace of the camels was increased to a moderate trot and held there until they sighted a small campfire about four kilometers northeast of Yanbu al Bahr. Three men sat around the flickering fire. When the group drew near, two of the men left the circle of fire and returned within seconds, leading three camels. The third man, Sheik Abu Hadid, stood with folded arms and faced the approaching camels. A gentle night breeze brushed across the sands and billowed his black riding abaya.

The lead rider, Mohammed three-finger, raised his arm above his head and the small caravan stopped. He slipped from his camel and handed the reins to the man behind him, then trotted to the fire and knelt with his forehead to the sand in front of the sheik.

Sheik Abu Hadid tapped Mohammed three-finger on the shoulder with the tip of his riding quirt. The Bedouin rose to his knees and kissed the hand of the sheik, then reached inside his riding abayia and withdrew the two black stones, placing them in his master's open hand.

Sheik Abu Hadid turned and knelt by the fire, examining the Tears of Eve. A slight smile twitched the corner of his mouth, he stood erect and placed his arm around Mohammed three-finger's shoulder, walking him slowly back to the waiting group. He glanced at the unconscious body of Niko slung over one of the camels and nodded his approval.

"Well done, Mohammed three-finger," he said. "The trust of King Husayn has not been violated."

Now a silent caravan of nine camels, the Hanafi Bedouins mounted and headed toward the Hijaz mountains rising in the northeast as a series of gently undulating plateaus. The tihamah, the flat coastal plain, disappeared into much more sand. It was deeper and formed small dunes accented with scattered outcroppings of volcanic rocks. They traveled for over an hour, until they came to a small oasis known as the stinking well of Jazeez.

There was a moderate-sized caravan camped to the north of the oasis, just far enough to avoid the sulfur-scented vapors of the well. Two night guards stood by the embers of a dying campfire. The air smelled strongly of burning camel dung. When they recognized Sheik Abu Hadid and his Hanafi warriors, one of the guards threw himself prostrate before the feared leader, while the second man raced to summon the caravan owner.

The sheik had just dismounted when a short, very stout man wearing a dirty, gray, abayia and a maroon fez appeared from the darkness carrying an oil lamp. At first, he appeared irritated and groggy with sleep. But when he recognized the sheik, he instantly dropped the

lamp and knelt, placing his forehead six inches from the toe of the sheik's sandal.

"Most honored, Sheik," he said. "My humble camp is yours." His voice had a definite Syrian accent.

The sheik touched the man's head with the toe of his sandal and he rose to his knees, but kept his head lowered in a submissive posture. He held his trembling hands in front of him as if he were praying.

"We crossed your trail earlier today" said the sheik. "These are Hanafi lands. Slave caravans do not cross these sands."

The man had to clear his throat twice before he could speak. "These are special slaves, honored sheik. They are a gift from King Husayn to Ali Hassan, the pasha of Damascus. These slaves are the dregs of society; outcasts, criminals, thieves and political prisoners; seventeen men and thirty-six women. They are to be used in the brothels of Damascus."

Just the hint of a smile formed on the sheik's lips. He half-turned and glanced at one of his warriors who stood by the camel bearing Niko's body, then nodded his head sharply.

The warrior easily slipped Niko over his shoulder and dumped him on the sand in front of the sheik.

"Here is another one," the sheik said. "My gift to the pasha. Place the iron about his neck and be certain he does not escape. If he does, you shall take his place."

## chapter i

### JEDDAH, SAUDI ARABIA JANUARY 4, 1979

Colonel Sam Givens, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, stood in the open doors of a darkened aircraft hangar, with a growing sense of frustration picking at his mind. The lack of a moon made him wonder about the phenomena of the Arabian sky, blacker than any night he could remember—even the nights in Nam when he lay in a hole waiting for the silhouettes of Viet Cong stalkers.

Even though he knew it was a wasted gesture, he glanced at the interior of the adjoining hangar, searching the inky darkness for signs of movement. The lemon-tinted reflection of the distant city lights was too muted to be helpful. He cursed himself for not bringing a flashlight.

The silence of the night was irritating, settling on him like a pall. Stillness bothered him. Every catastrophe of

his service life had sprung on him from either stillness or a moment of vacuum. He hated the prolonged hush of silence, almost to the point of fear. It made him feel ornery, suspicious without knowing why. He knew it would be another one of those lousy nights when he couldn't sleep because something in the room kept moving—yet nothing was there. It had been that way ever since he entered the country.

*Why'd that son of a bitch pick me?*

Sam vented a long breath and half-turned, once again glancing across the deserted runway at the darkened buildings on the far side of the airfield. The eerie glow of the yellow sodium streetlights of Jeddah made the outline of the Haj terminal a sharp silhouette. All was quiet, no traffic—a night without whisper. Jeddah, the burial site of Eve, was asleep.

He paced about ten feet and traced one hand across the vague outline of his pistol underneath the left breast of his trench coat, a World War II vintage Walther P-38. His close friends chided him for carrying such an 'old timer', but it had saved his life twice. He was rarely without it. A sudden twinkle low on the eastern horizon caught his attention, three lights, slowly increasing in size. Sam frowned. *Finally. Here comes Caesar.*

He followed the landing lights of the C-130 until the wheels touched the runway, then glanced at his wrist watch: 0110.

*He's twenty minutes late.*

A faint metallic noise made him jerk his head to the right, he took a quick backward step into the blackness of the hangar and drew his P-38. It felt good in his hand.

In his peripheral vision, a dark blur separated itself from a row of shipping crates stacked by the corner of the hangar. He crouched low and moved quickly toward the spot, staying well away from the hangar in case someone waited for him to step past the corner—but there was nothing.

For a tense moment, he stood rock still, peering into the darkness, trying to sense movement. There was nothing along the side of the hangar except the dim outlines of two more shipping crates. He stayed low, ready for battle, cautiously edging foot past foot toward the first crate. The visibility was so poor that he was within three feet of the crate before he was able to see that the entire side was missing. It was empty.

Moving as quickly as he dared, he stepped to the second crate, tense, ready. He squeezed the grip of the P-38 and kicked the end of the crate with his foot. A shrill squeal sent a chill down his back when two large rats scurried from behind the case. He sprang back and sucked a mouthful of air into his lungs, a torrent of revulsion made every pore on his body tingle.

“Fucking rats!”

Sam held his tense crouch for several seconds, pulse pounding, straining to see.

Nothing moved.

His right arm began to tremble, the tension of his grip on the pistol sent a cramp through his forearm. He relaxed, stood erect, shoved the P-38 back into the holster and flexed his fingers to restore circulation, trying to make sense of the amorphous shadows. The whine of the approaching aircraft commanded his attention. Al-

most reluctantly, he walked back to the hangar slowly—a cat on the prowl searching the shadows.

The C-130 Hercules taxied within thirty feet of the hangar and the engine whine slowly faded into the peace of the night. The pilot switched all lights off and the dark figures of five men emerged from the aircraft; four of them remained by the side of the C-130 and the fifth walked toward Sam in a brisk gait.

Sam took a step forward and saluted, the dark outline of the man returned the salute and he felt the hand of Lt. General Mark Wykopft grasp his and shake it firmly.

“The vehicle’s waiting, General.”

“Let’s get moving, Colonel. I have to be airborne before first light.”

Sam led the general through the darkened hangar toward a sedan silhouetted against the open rear door of the structure. A half second after he opened the door of the vehicle, a clicking noise came from the darkness on the other side of the sedan. At the instant Sam’s head snapped toward the sound, a flashbulb pierced the blackness. Both men covered their eyes in reflex.

Unable to see anything but the persistence of garish yellow patterns, Sam held an arm in front of his face and rolled his body along the side of the sedan. When he took his hand from his eyes, he heard scuffling feet coming from the door of the hangar. He still couldn’t see, so he traced one hand along the rear surface of the sedan, using it as a guide, trying to get to the door. His knee hit the rear bumper, pain shot down his leg and he tumbled to the concrete floor. In the background he could hear

the fading sound of running feet.

“Shit!” Sam’s whispered frustration seemed to amplify as it bounced from the walls of the empty hangar. The flare of the flashbulb still pestered his vision and he knew there was no hope of catching the mysterious photographer, so he sat a moment, rubbing his knee and hoping he hadn’t torn the cartilage. The knee had given him trouble for years, a living memoir of the Viet Nam campaign. He stood to his feet, leaning most of his weight on the sedan, then gingerly limped around the vehicle to where he’d left the general.

The door of the sedan was still open and General Wykopft was partially bent over, brushing his clothes.

“You O.K. General?”

“I think so, I hit the ground right after the flash. Old instincts die hard.” He put a hand on his lower back and stretched. “I think I threw my back out. Haven’t moved like that in ten years.”

They stepped into the rear of the sedan and Sam pulled the door closed. Moving slowly without lights, they drove through the darkness of the hangar and across the short tarmac to a perimeter road circling the outer boundaries of the airport.

The vehicle stopped and their driver turned his head. “Where do you wish to go, Sir?”

The general leaned his head toward Sam and whispered, “Is the driver cleared?”

“Yes Sir. He’s Major Edwards, one of the Marine attachés assigned to the embassy staff.”

The general nodded and leaned forward, placing a hand on the major’s shoulder. “Take us to the King’s

summer palace,” he said. “And understand this, Major. I’m not really here tonight and you don’t remember anything that’s said in this vehicle.”

“Understood, Sir.”

They drove slowly in the darkness until they reached an asphalt road, whereupon the driver flicked on the headlights and turned onto Al Rabat highway. Yellow sodium highway lights began to sweep past the windows.

“Whoever that son of a bitch was, he didn’t come to kill us,” General Wykopft said. “If he did, we’d all be dead.”

“The consulate told me your visit was secret,” Sam said.

“That’s what I thought.” A lighter flared and revealed a brief glimpse of the general’s features as he drew the flame into the bowl of his pipe. The sweet aroma of Danish tobacco filled the sedan and his voice took on a relaxed drone.

“The whole goddamned project was supposed to be secret. That’s the way the Saudi’s wanted it. We maxed our efforts to keep it tight. No leaks. We timed your assignment to take over the Jeddah operation just thirty days after Colonel Steed requested retirement. Outwardly, it was a normal change of command, just business as usual.”

Sam nodded.

The general continued, “When we left Milan last night, our official flight plan had us scheduled for Athens. We didn’t change course until we cleared the Adriatic. We followed every approved procedure in the

covert profile, all the recommended hush-hush bullshit, and some clown is waiting in the shadows to take our picture when we land.”

An anxious twinge in Sam’s bruised knee prompted a glance back over his shoulder.

The general chuckled. “I should have known better. The paradox of Saudi Arabia. It’s a land of secrets, yet it’s near impossible to keep one. Remember that, Colonel.”

“Then this isn’t just a normal duty assignment?”

General Wykopft was silent for a moment then patted Sam’s knee. “We’ll talk later. How long have you been in country?”

“Two days, I’m still fighting jet lag.”

“How are your quarters?”

“The Saudi government assigned us a closed compound. It’s on the Red Sea about half a mile from the Embassy. The buildings are old, a giant cockroach colony. But they’re better than a bivouac in the desert.”

The general fell quiet. Sam followed the unspoken military protocol and remained silent. He stared out the window at the passing features of Jeddah: narrow twisting alleys, the biblical-looking houses, and the piles of rubble from the on-going reconstruction of the city.

The past week had been the strangest in Sam’s life. After years of assignments in no-name places, he’d drawn the plum of the Alaskan command; a modern office overlooking the scenic majesty of Juneau, Alaska, enjoying a nine-to-five life, and getting all the pussy he could handle. Then, without any explanation, he was yanked from his quarters by a high priority pentagon

command and sent flying endlessly through the night to an unknown assignment—in a culture where he couldn't even read the simplest sign post. As if this in itself wasn't bad enough; the boss was 'kiss of death' Mark Wykopft, a ruthless general with a spooky reputation for getting people around him killed.

*I've served in every third-world shit hole known to man. Now I get to work on the rim of the world's asshole for this insane son of a bitch.*

The thought kept running through his mind like an endless tape, but he knew he couldn't utter a word. Sam was pure Army, and good soldiers obey without complaint.

They turned onto the Medinah highway, traveling less than a quarter mile before the vehicle turned into a palm-lined lane, which was paved with bricks and ended at a massive wrought iron gate. Two uniformed guards stood on each side of the gate, and several more at a concealed guard house on the right side of the lane.

"This is the King's summer palace," the major said in a low tone. "These guys are really tight-ass about security."

A commonalty of appearance shared by the guards impressed Sam; they could have been clones. All of them were dusky, olive-skinned men with dark features, black hair and trimmed moustaches, all wearing red-and-white checkered gutras on their heads, all dressed in crisply-pressed, olive drab uniforms.

Flashlight beams probed inside the sedan, guards looked under the hood, in the trunk, underneath the vehicle with mirrors and flashlights. A half-dozen pair of

eyes scrutinized them. Two flashlight beams centered on the three stars on Mark Wykopft's shoulders. Immediately, the officer of the guard stiffened to attention, he snapped a sharp salute and the wrought iron gates slowly opened.

They drove past the twelve-foot gates and traveled only sixty yards before stopping underneath the protecting overhang of a marble portico extending from the palace.

The Marine driver half-turned his head and whispered to his two passengers, "Something's hot. They usually get everybody out of the car and pat them down. Do everything but look up your ass. Always takes forty minutes to get past the first gate."

The general looked askance at Sam, winked and stepped from the sedan. Sam followed. They were immediately surrounded by a formation of twelve palace guards, each man over six foot tall, trim, neatly groomed, and all wearing the distinctive uniforms and red berets of the royal security force.

Sam and the general walked side-by-side, cordoned by the guards. The lighting of the palace enabled Sam to see the features of the general clearly for the first time since he stepped from the darkened aircraft. He was surprised: he'd served under a vigorous and dynamic Mark Wykopft in Viet Nam, when he was still a major general and skinny. At that time, the general was a trim one-hundred and sixty pounds; his hair was jet black and his features unwrinkled.

Dark circles now lined his eyes. There was an unhealthy pallor to his wrinkled complexion, and his hair

had turned steel gray. Sam knew the general stood five-foot-ten, six inches shorter than himself, but now he looked shorter, maybe even a little bent over. His movements were labored, his uniform tunic bulged, and he had to weigh over two-hundred pounds.

The general caught Sam's glance and nodded his head slightly. A faint smile crossed his lips. "I know, Colonel" he whispered. "I look like Humpty Dumpty. A sedentary life of military politics hasn't helped my girlish figure. I've paid a stiff price for my third star."

Sam looked askance at the general again, but kept his mouth shut and fumed to himself. *Bullshit! If there's a price for your success, somebody else paid the bill.*

The guards ushered them through the inner sanctum of the palace, a series of opulent marble rooms bedecked with Islamic art treasures, ceramics, paintings, crystal, and exotic oriental carpets. They stopped in front of a very wide door shaped like a Moorish arch, a configuration architects call a donkey door. The lieutenant of the guard opened the door and gave the general a snappy salute, then bowed smartly and extended the palm of an open hand toward the room.

The room was long and rectangular in shape, perhaps thirty by twenty feet. The walls on three sides were covered by premium rosewood bookcases, its shelves filled with books.

Sam took off his overseas cap and ran his hand across his close-cropped sandy hair. He glanced across the ordered rows of leather-bound volumes; some with titles in French, some in English, and many in Arabic. At the far end of the room was a magnificent desk

crafted from Ebony wood. On the wall behind the desk hung a striking oriental silk carpet, an Isphahan tied in an intricate Shah Abbas design.

Just in front of the desk was a low coffee table, also crafted from Ebony wood. The table sat on a Heriz Serapi oriental carpet, with two, mahogany-tone, leather wing chairs on each side.

The general stepped to one of the bookcases, scanned the titles and ran his fingers across the polished surface of the rosewood with a sense of reverence. "Premium Rosewood, and excellent craftsmanship. Top drawer quality. Not for the ribbon clerks of the world. I've always wanted a room like this." There was a distant quality in his voice, as if he were musing about an unattainable dream. "I can feel the peace."

"Perhaps, my friend, it is the peace of Islam you feel." The voice came from behind them. They turned to see Dr. Ibrahim Esberi, his head bowed slightly, a gentle smile on his lips. He wore a flowing black mishlah over his white thobe. The loose nature of the garments made it impossible to evaluate his build. A white silk gutra covered his head and draped to his shoulders. His face was smoothly shaven and he wore dark tortoise-shell glasses. His eyes were magical, the warm brown of sage honey, flecked with bits of green, radiating an aura of peace.

General Wykopft broke into a wide grin, he pumped the doctor's hand and the two men embraced.

"Dr. Esberi, it's so good to see you."

"Peace be upon you, General. May Allah guide your steps."

The general extended a hand toward Sam. “Dr. Esberi, this is the man you selected, Colonel Sam Givens, a top-notch combat engineer.”

Sam shook hands with the doctor, surprised at the strength in his grip. General Wykopft’s words refused to leave his mind: *The man you selected? For what?*

Dr. Esberi extended an arm in the direction of the wing back chairs. “Welcome, gentlemen. Please, be comfortable.”

He clapped his hands twice and the door opened. Two servants dressed in crisp white thobes padded into the room carrying silver bowls, tea glasses, small linen napkins and a steaming pelican-beak pot. They placed bowls of plump red Saudi dates and golden Adriatic figs on the coffee table, arranged the tea service and napkins, then poured the sweet amber tea into small glasses and slipped from the room as quickly as they entered.

Dr. Esberi sat in one of the wing chairs opposite Sam and the general.

“Please partake of our hospitality, gentlemen. I realize your time is extremely limited, General, and the minutes pass quickly. Please forgive me if I pass some background information of the project to the colonel while you refresh yourselves.” He picked up the bowl of figs, carefully selected a ripe one and handed it to Sam. “Our Bedouin custom demands we select food for our guests.” He studied the fruit for a moment, offered a fig to the general, then returned the bowl to the table.

“Let me tell you something about the geographic nature of my country, Colonel Givens. Historically, the people of Saudi Arabia are Bedouins, Arabs who wan-

der. Our lands are mostly desert, our water resources sparse. These two factors limit development. Consequently, our cities are few and widely separated.”

Sam nodded politely.

“Riyadh is our capital, it is three-hundred miles from the Arabian gulf and five-hundred miles from the Red Sea. Since we rely heavily on imports, and most of those come by sea, you can see that logistic supply over long distances is an on-going problem. Regardless of this, the roots of our history grow deep in the sands of Riyadh. It is the home of our royal family and most of our government agencies.

“The city of Jeddah is also an important part of our history. First, it is the port of entry for Muslims on pilgrimage to Mecca, the holiest city of Islam. Secondly, it is located on the Red Sea and easily reached by freighters operating from European ports. Jeddah is a commerce and banking center where businessmen of the outer world interface with the merchants of Saudi. Therefore, all foreign embassies are located there.

“The last two decades have seen gross changes in Saudi Arabia. Our petroleum resources require active coordination with many foreign nations. Each year it has been necessary to increase the number of conferences with foreign ministers, and we are visited by heads of states five or six times a year. When these dignitaries visit, they prefer to operate from the convenience and sanctity of their embassies, in Jeddah. It is cumbersome for them to travel back and forth to Riyadh on a daily basis.

“On the other hand, you cannot expect our royal

family or ministers of state to commute for the convenience of others. Therein lies the basis of this project; we must establish a secure meeting ground that is favorable to both sides.”

Dr. Esberi paused to sip his tea, then offered the general and Sam more fruit.

“This palace is large,” Sam said. “Couldn’t your government use it for meetings in Jeddah?”

Dr. Esberi shook his head. “No. This palace belongs to the king, it is his summer home. It is not for business. And confidentially, the security of this palace has become marginal because there are buildings in Jeddah that overlook the palace grounds. At one time, the royal family spent their summers here. But in recent years, the king’s visits are infrequent.

“It would be downright stupid of us to hold a conference with the heads of several governments in this palace, and allow some simple terrorist in an office building to fire rockets into the palace courtyard. Jeddah is a large city. Within five years there will be several skyscrapers, and many more foreigners. As Jeddah grows and becomes more international in nature, security diminishes. The time is coming when this palace will be nothing more than a showplace.”

Dr. Esberi pushed the tea service aside and took a document from inside his mishlah. He unfolded it and placed it on the coffee table. It was a map of the western coast of Saudi Arabia.

“The problem I’ve outlined has a solution. We call it the King’s Island Project.”

He took a silver pencil from an inner pocket and

pointed to the coastline between Jeddah and the city of Yanbu Al Bahr, two-hundred-and-twenty miles to the north.

“This section of the coast of Saudi Arabia is dotted with many tiny islands. Most of them are nothing more than small outcroppings of coral, but several are of fair size. We are interested in two in particular, Khall Island and Sukkar Island.

“Our plan is to erect a royal reception center on one of these islands. It will provide accommodations suitable for the royal family and a limited number of foreign dignitaries. At present we envision a large villa for the royal family and ten smaller villas to accommodate forty VIP guests. There will also be a large conference facility, a mosque, dedicated fresh water, power and sewage facilities, security quarters and a heliport on the mainland. We also require a deep water docking facility for the king’s yacht.

“The geographic security of both islands is excellent, there isn’t a settlement within twenty-five miles of either one and the nearest paved road is ten miles away. Khall Island is about forty-two air miles from Jeddah, and Sukkar Island is farther, about two-hundred and forty miles. Both are within easy helicopter range of local airports capable of servicing jet aircraft traffic.

“The royal family has approved the project and our ministry of planning has requested construction to start in November of this year to enable implementation of the facility in late 1981. We have, however, encountered two problems. First: we must select only one of the two islands, and that decision cannot be reached until we

have a comprehensive analysis of both. Second; such an exhaustive analysis requires a team of seasoned Military engineers and specialists who have extensive experience in engineering, construction, and logistics in areas with difficult terrain.”

Dr. Esberi looked up and smiled at Sam. “Which brings us to this visit, and you, Colonel.”

Sam had been leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. His surprise was obvious. He sat up abruptly and looked at General Wykopft.

The general nodded to Dr. Esberi. “Colonel Givens hasn’t been briefed, Doctor. Let me explain the Army’s position.” He rested his tea glass on the table and relit his pipe; the smoke had a pleasant aroma reminiscent of cherries.

“Colonel, the Army Corps of Engineers has a large facility in Milan, Italy. Our charter there directs us to supply engineering and technical support to any of the NATO pact nations, with the approval of Washington. We also have a second charter that allows us to supply the same services to any nation our government identifies as a developing country.

“Our arrangement with the kingdom of Saudi Arabia goes beyond that; the scope is confidential, we won’t discuss it at this time. The Corp of Engineers has two facilities in-country: one in Jubail and one here, in Jeddah. You will be in command of both units.

“Your charter is very simple; you will supply engineering and technical support as requested by the government of Saudi Arabia. However, the King’s Island Project is special because it is secret, and, because

you will interface with hostile political forces, your management profile will have to follow the guidance of Dr. Esberi—closely. Since this is an expanded role with possible international elements. You will maintain close communication lines with me at all times. I repeat, every detail of the project will be secret, treated with the same vigor and caution you would exercise in any other such project. Understood?”

Sam nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good. I’ve written detailed instructions about your duties in this matter, Sam, and the specialists you’ll need. I’ve cut transfer orders for ten engineering specialists. They’ll arrive in Jeddah at ten-hundred this morning. You’ll need three or four civilian specialists. I leave that selection to you. I’ll pass the mission portfolio to you before I return to Milan.”

Sam remained silent, simply nodding.

*Now he’s calling me Sam. When this guy gets friendly, survivors put their asses to the wall.*

The general glanced at his wristwatch. “Our time is passing quickly, and Dr. Esberi has further instructions.”

Dr. Esberi offered Sam more tea; but he declined. The doctor filled his own glass and dropped two cubes of sugar into the amber tea. As he stirred, his facial expression turned tense.

“There are political forces within my country that will place obstacles in your path, Colonel. Prior to 1932, when Abdul Aziz ibn Saud united our kingdom, there were many heated confrontations in the Hijaz district, which comprises over half of our western coast. You and your people will have to work in the district. Many of

the people of Hijaz have bitter memories, old wounds do not heal in our culture. These tribal politics can easily turn violent. They're very complex. We'll discuss them in depth at a later meeting.

“Finally, a word about security. I want you to know why it's important. Seven-hundred miles to the north, terrorism and violence rages in Lebanon and Israel. We have both religious and political interests in this conflict. You'll come to learn the entire Middle East is a cauldron of mixed views, some philosophical and others extremely radical. We have both friends and enemies in many quarters.

“When the project is finished, we're going to place members of our royal family and the leaders of the free world on one of these islands. Just imagine what a coup such a target would be to terrorists or malcontents. We know we can't keep the island a secret, but before the outer world learns about the King's Island, we want a sophisticated security system in place and operating.”

There was a light tap on the door, Dr. Esberi went and opened it, but just a crack. Sam heard muffled voices, and then the Doctor shut the door and returned, but he didn't sit. General Wykopft stood and Sam followed.

“The fighter escort is airborne, General,” the doctor said. “Your aircraft has been serviced and your crew notified. You have thirty minutes before take-off.” He shook hands with the general and they embraced, then turned and grasped Sam's hand.

“We shall meet twice monthly, Colonel. The dates will be random and you'll be notified two days before

each meeting. Our meetings will be in this room, at approximately the same time we met today. Come alone; do not use a driver. May Allah smile upon you, Sam. Masallahma.”



When they left the palace, General Wykopft cautioned Sam about discussing the project until they were alone, so they rode in silence. Sam stared out the window; the passing shadows of buildings and alleys didn't register because his mind was locked on an incident that occurred during the final days of the Viet Nam conflict.

General Wykopft had ordered a battalion of Sam's combat engineers to replace a bridge just above Da Nang where the Khong River crosses the Laotian border. The move offered no military advantage and was tactically useless. Thirty-one men were killed and Sam narrowly escaped with a shattered kneecap. Later, Sam learned the request for the bridge came from Intelligence sources in the Pentagon as a suggestion—*not* as an order. Mark Wykopft's decision was political.

The incident haunted Sam for several years, then rose from his memory earlier that day when he received a coded message to meet Mark Wykopft's aircraft. The dormant embers of hate for the “kiss of death general” flared anew, and this mysterious assignment in Saudi Arabia suddenly became a bitter taste in his mouth.

When the sedan turned into the darkened hangar and stopped, General Wykopft immediately stepped from the vehicle, thanked the Marine driver and started walking

briskly toward the waiting aircraft. Sam stayed with him.

The C-130 was still a dark shadow in the night. Sam could just make out the dark outlines of two men standing next to the entry hatch. One of the figures acknowledged the general with a wave, he waved back and walked Sam to a spot on the tarmac about eighty feet from the aircraft. He pulled a thick manila envelope from inside his tunic, handed it to Sam as he moved closer, keeping his voice just above the level of a whisper.

“Here are your orders, Sam. Everything you need to start your organization is there. Letters of introduction, special passes and documents, all signed by a Saudi Prince. You’re an old soldier and know your way around the block. I don’t have to tell you there are people in Washington looking right up our collective asses. Watch your back at all times.

“I’ve outlined your duties in detail, anything you want, just ask. Telephones in this country are not secure; don’t use them for anything important. Don’t try to contact me through the embassy and don’t trust any of the civilian staff. I’ll keep in contact with you through couriers that will arrive twice a week. All reports will be sent to me, and everything will be encoded. You know the drill.”

“About civilian personnel, are there any restrictions on who I select?” Sam’s voice was cold, almost brusque. It made the general pause a second before he answered.

“No. But try to use people you personally know or have worked with before. Hire them on six-month contracts and pay them well. You don’t have a hard budget

limit on this project, but don't let anybody fuck you."

Sam hesitated a moment, the anger he felt radiated from his stiff posture, and he could tell the general sensed it.

"What is it, Sam? We're a couple of old soldiers, if you have anything in your craw, spit it out."

"Can we speak off the record?"

"Go ahead."

"I get the feeling I'm being set up. I can't speak the language, I can't even find a place to pee without a guide, and this Esberi guy tells me the locals would like to see my head on a stake. The assignment is clear enough, but I can't make a move without this Arab leading the way. I'm responsible for the job, but Esberi's making all the decisions. Sounds to me like I'm stepping in shit."

The general chuckled lightly, then his voice turned cold and took on an edge. "Look at it this way: If there weren't any problems, we wouldn't need managers, in which case you'd probably be looking at retirement." He paused for a heartbeat to let the veiled threat of retirement soak in. "You're a seasoned engineering manager, Colonel. Make the project work. As for Dr. Esberi, don't underrate him, he's a razor-sharp administrator and diplomat."

Sam caught the threat; a spasm of temper made him tighten his jaw muscles and his voice was brusque. "A razor cuts both ways and it's my head on the block. What I want to know is can I trust him?"

"And what choice do you have? Come on, you're acting like a naked virgin. You're lucky to have him be-

hind you. Dr. Esberi is a respected confidant of the royal family, and in this country that's awesome power."

A flashlight blinked twice from the side of the aircraft. The general grabbed Sam's hand and shook it.

"Time to go. Any last questions?"

The overtone of respect was missing from Sam's voice. "No, General. I'm a builder, not a politician, so I'm walking on razor blades. It's been my experience that projects mixed with political overtones are unpredictable. You never know if the assignment was a punishment or reward."

The general ignored the nature of Sam's reply and slapped him on the shoulder. "I've always found my assignments to be a little of both." As he turned and walked toward the aircraft, one of the engines began to whine.

Sam stood in the darkness and watched the lights of the aircraft until they disappeared in the early morning haze of the horizon. There was a terrible sense of hollowness in his belly. He stared at the spot where the aircraft had melted into the haze and whispered to himself. "I wonder what kind of ticking bomb that bastard has handed me? The only thing I know for sure is that Mark Wykopft hasn't changed. He's still a disingenuous son of a bitch."

## chapter 2

### **EAST OF UMM LAJ, SAUDI ARABIA JANUARY 6, 1979**

The cobra swayed in a lethal rhythm. A shaft of sunlight brushed the serpent's head. The snake moved and a scarlet sparkle flashed from the beady eyes. Mouth ajar, the creature's forked tongue flicked sensory esters from the morning air, tasting the presence of the three men.

"A noble ally." Prince Sulayman half-turned and nodded to his uncle, Sheik Abu Kamal ibn Husayn, then returned his attention to the serpent and drained the syrupy Turkish coffee from his silver cup, watching the Hanafi Bedouin handler retrieve the cobra and drop it into a muslin sack.

"Excellent." Sulayman nodded to the handler, who bowed low then carried a trio of muslin sacks to a group of horses picketed thirty feet distant.

Sulayman's eyes followed the progress of the snake handler. When he was beyond hearing range, Sulayman spoke low to his uncle. "Have them released on the island—this morning."

Sheik Husayn glanced toward the horses, only to be certain of their privacy, then nodded. "I doubt they'll survive. They are sand cobras. The island setting is not natural to them."

Sulayman took a pair of binoculars from an open saddlebag resting on the ground next to the Sheik's camp chair. "The mangrove on the island is infested with rats. They'll live well. Just be sure they're released around the fresh water pool."

He raised the glasses to his eyes and scanned along the coast of the Red Sea, ten kilometers away. The two men stood on a small plateau in the rising foothills of the Hijaz Mountains, about three-hundred feet above sea level at this elevation. There were many uninhabited islands along the coast, most of them only low coral outcroppings. A few of them were much larger with low-growing mangrove swamps.

"If the infidels are bitten, there will be questions," Sheik Husayn noted.

Prince Sulayman snorted a short breath, as if the statement were a joke. "Anyone bitten will not live to question the incident. The nearest hospital is in Yanbu al Bahr, seventy kilometers." He lowered the glasses and glanced at his uncle. "Besides, who but Allah would question the logic of a serpent?"

"It's just that one does not find sand cobras on barren coral islands. The royal family might—"

“Are you questioning my wisdom in this?” Sulayman’s brow knitted into a frown, his dark brown eyes flashed a sparkle suggesting his mercurial temper was stirring.

Sheik Husayn glanced askew at the tribesmen tending the horses. He’d seen their heads turn when Prince Sulayman raised his voice.

“Your voice carries,” he said. He rose from the camp chair and stepped to the edge of the fire, standing beside Sulayman, facing the horses so he could keep the tribesmen in view. His movements were halting and clearly uncomfortable to him—the rewards of age and too much time on horseback.

On his head, he wore the distinctive gutra of the Hanafi tribe: a white field covered with a random pattern of black arrowheads. He threw the ends of his gutra over his shoulder so they wouldn’t singe in the flames when he bent forward and rubbed his hands over the fire. The combination of his leathery, honey-brown skin and gray whiskers made him look ancient in the firelight, an appearance his eyes accented—they were weary eyes.

“My Prince,” he said, “the answer to your question is obvious. Your family is not your enemy. You are my cousin Fatima’s son, I have always cared for you. If my simple questions appear as threats, it is because the wisdom of my years makes me cautious. Prince Musari is dangerous.”

At the moment, Prince Sulayman Husayn ibn Saud, Sayf al Dawla, looked as if he’d stepped from the set of an Arabian movie. Darkly handsome with the features of Valentino, his olive-toned skin suffered the faint traces of

wrinkles forged by the Arabian sun. His Van-dyke beard was precisely trimmed and sprinkled with a dusting of gray. He was the chunky stereotype of a middle-aged desert Prince.

He also wore the gutra of the Hanafi tribe on his head and a flowing black abayia thrown back over his shoulders. However, his style of dress was English: Jodhpurs, ankle-high riding boots and a forest-green suede jacket.

He nudged a piece of wood into the embers with the tip of his riding boot, then circled the campfire and stood with his back to the horses so his words would not carry to unwanted ears. He adjusted the abayia on his shoulders and looked off toward the coastal islands for a moment, considering his uncle's reply.

*He's right. Prince Musari has me edgy.* But he said, "The treatment I receive in Riyadh makes me irritable." His head was lowered to muffle his words. "I tire of their innuendos, of court politics, of being buried in a line of over two-thousand princes, purely because my mother was born in Hijaz."

"Patience nephew, Riyadh has always treated us like Turks." The sheik paused and cast a quick glance behind him. "We need more time, there are still many feathers in the rump of the golden goose."

The statement brought a momentary smile to Sulayman's lips. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "The Tears of Eve persist?"

"Bountiful, my Prince. Beyond dreams, you must travel to Geneva soon."

Sulayman looked at the islands again, his smile

faded.

“It’s not just Sukkar Island. I resent their presence on our land. The King’s Island Project is a Trojan horse, the vile fruit of Prince Musari’s jealous mind. It is a sham he conceived to embarrass me before the royal family, to rub my nose in the shit of a camel. That bastard uses his blindness as a sword of empathy, always whispering in the ear of the king.

“I am the legal heir of King Husayn ibn Ali, grand Sharif of Mecca. I will not give up these lands. Now Musari brings the American government into this, uses their Army engineers. I cannot think of his evil scheme without seething, that son of a Damascus whore.”

“There is little you can do, the king treats him like a favored camel,” the sheik noted.

Sulayman’s lips drew thin in tension. “I know. But if I can reach the king’s ear, I have an economic plan that will divert his attention. Oh yes, the island plan will be soon forgotten. Only Musari stands in the way.”

The Sheik smiled, he looked past Sulayman at three tribesmen fitting saddles and tack onto the horses and kept his eyes on them as he spoke. “Nothing is final nephew, the intruders will never rest easy on the island. There will be sleepless nights as long as I am sheik of the Hanafi tribe.”

Sulayman nodded, he glanced around to locate the moving tribesmen, all busy loading camels and horses and packing up the camp. He lowered his voice to a whisper again. “The blind prince is not invincible. I have seen the writing on Musari’s forehead. He will not see the end of summer.”

The Sheik's eyes darted to the right and left, his posture became tense, his voice guarded. "Careful my prince, he is watched over by the Wahabbi. They have spies everywhere, even here in Hijaz."

"The camel that will carry Musari's soul to hell is being groomed." Sulayman smiled at his declaration and glanced at his wristwatch. "I must leave. My plane will be waiting in Yanbu. I have meetings in Riyadh this afternoon."



*Gold! Nothing but gold!*

Niki Tamani's mouth was ajar, his eyes glazed in wonder.

The window display overflowed with gold. It hung from the three walls of the shop in stacked tiers of bracelets, chains and earrings—even a matched pair of three-foot scimitars. Every display case bulged with gold, countless baubles of every form and description. The precious metal even hung from the ceiling, row after row of gleaming necklaces draped from suspended poles raised and lowered on unseen pulleys.

A battery of mini-floodlights made the glitter overwhelming, Niki had to squint to examine the display. Even though he knew true harmony was a balance between material simplicity and inner peace, he struggled to keep from being swept away by the moment.

The call to prayer made Niki turn his head. The pleading voice of the Muezzin cried from the minaret of the Mosque of Akbar, the final phrases of the summons

penetrated the noon air of Riyadh with a lyrical magnetism.

*Come to prayer  
God is most great  
There is no God but Allah*

The third prayer call of the day echoed through the twisting streets of the ancient city. It rang in Niki's ears and made him turn from the window of the gold shop. Even though he wasn't a Muslim, the Muezzin's call to the faithful struck a resonant chord in his mind. The moment carried him back to Japan.

For a microsecond, he imagined he knelt in the quiet mists of morning, meditating in the peace of his Zen garden. He recalled how the earthy peal of an ancient bell in the shrine touched him in the same manner. A passing religious police truck broke the moment, a loud-speaker mounted on the rear bed blared into the winding alleys of the central souk.

"Salah, Salah," (Prayer, prayer) a voice called.

Merchants scurried to lower shades in the shop windows, and those with outdoor displays covered them with coarse netting and locked their doors. Business was not conducted during prayer time.

Niki glanced at his watch and strolled to the end of the alley. He paused to get his bearings, then turned left and walked slowly down Al Muktah road. There was a brisk traffic of pedestrians, some foreigners but mostly Saudi's dressed in white thobes, wearing red and white gutras—all with dark sunglasses. In his usual passive

posture, Niki kept his head slightly lowered and avoided eye contact.

Just before the intersection where Al Muktah joins the Jeddah highway, he stopped and looked at the bronze sign on a two-story marble building sitting sixty feet back from the road.

ROYAL MINISTRY OF JUSTICE  
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Three soldiers stepped from the front door of the building, exchanging a string of rapid-fire Arabic as they walked. Niki bowed respectfully when they passed him, but they ignored his presence. The cavalier treatment didn't bother Niki. He knew his stark, black sharkskin suit and oriental features clearly marked him as a foreigner. Accordingly, he knew he could expect little more than a politely distant nod from most Saudi's—the exception would be those who wished to sell him something.

Niki entered the building and stopped in front of a wrought iron gate that divided the reception area into two sections. Sitting at a desk just beyond the gate, a guard attired in a sharply pressed khaki uniform and red and white gutra headpiece, nodded to him.

“Marhaba,” the guard said.

Niki bowed and kept a benign smile on his face, then shook his head to signify he didn't understand. He rested his attaché case on the marble floor and took a leather secretary wallet from his inside coat pocket, handing it to the guard, then he bowed again.

“Prince Sulayman bin Saud, Sayf al Dawla,” Niki said. The phrase was the limit of his fluency in Arabic.

The guard offered no response, his features completely passive. He accepted the wallet, but stared at Niki much longer than necessary before he checked the credentials.

In a very methodical and deliberate manner, the guard examined every document in the wallet: an airline ticket, a stack of business cards printed in several languages, an itinerary, a hotel reservation confirmation, and a passport. He took an exceptional amount of time to thumb through every page of the passport, scrutinizing the entry stamps and glancing at Niki repeatedly to verify his features with the photograph in the document.

Throughout this exaggerated procedure, Niki kept thoughts of peace in his mind. He stood with his head lowered, a passive smile on his lips, and discreetly watched the guard in his peripheral vision.

When the guard finished with the wallet, he stood and looked through the iron bars at the attaché case by Niki’s feet. Niki promptly picked up the case and slipped it between the bars, not a word was spoken, not an eyelid fluttered. The guard placed the attaché case on his desk and proceeded to carefully examine every article in the case, as if he had all the time in the world.



Prince Sulayman Husayn ibn Saud, sword of the state, joined his hands in a church-and-steeple position and placed the steeple against his chin. He leaned back

in his ostrich leather swivel chair and peered thoughtfully through the darkly tinted window behind his desk. Traffic buzzed on the streets of Riyadh, but he saw only the problem in his mind.

What commanded Sulayman's attention was an extreme act—the murder of Prince Musari. It was a dangerous gambit that had to be extremely subtle. It had to take place quickly, and it had to occur in a manner that left him at arms length from the act. Not even a whisper of his involvement would be tolerated. In the past twenty minutes, a series of methods marched through his thoughts. He'd evaluated each option carefully, trying to forecast the most logical result.

What bothered him most was the lack of time. He needed an audience with the king before the King's Island Project became a reality. It was imperative that he keep the American engineers from surveying Sukkar Island.

*If Prince Musari does not let me reach the king's ear, he must join Allah.*

A chime sounded and a tiny red light on his desk console started blinking, he pressed a button on the console. A metallic-voice came from a small loudspeaker in the console.

“Forgive me, your highness. There's an oriental man awaiting your pleasure. His credentials agree with your appointment schedule. He is Niki Tamani, Vice president, Matsu Ltd. Tokyo, Japan. He has been screened.”

“Bring him to me.”

“Yes, Excellency.”

Prince Sulayman depressed another one of the but-

tons on his desk console and a solenoid clicked on one of three doors entering his office. The center door opened and two husky guards dressed in neatly pressed khaki uniforms stepped into the office and took positions on either side of the door. A third guard entered the office with Niki Tamani behind him. He stepped across the twenty-foot Tabriz oriental carpet gracing the marble floor and stopped exactly eight feet from the front edge of Sulayman's polished Rosewood desk. He saluted and bowed, then placed a manila folder in front of the Prince. He bowed again, took a sidewise step and backed up three paces, stopping just behind Niki. His eyes never left the Prince.

Sulayman opened the file with one hand. He studied the document for several seconds then glanced at the escort guard. He raised his hand from the file and flicked his fingers lightly, as if brushing aside an insect. All three guards bowed and quickly left the room.

When the security latch on the door clicked, Sulayman looked directly at his guest and held a finger across his lips. He quickly depressed two red buttons on his desk console. White metal panels slid from the upper sections of the windows and blocked the outer world from view. Two seconds later, the low sound of an Arab flute filled the room with a soft melody.

The music came from a series of small speakers, which directed the music against the surfaces of the glass windows and the doors of the room. If an outside intruder were monitoring any of these surfaces with a modulation detection device, he would hear nothing but music.

“What is said here must stay here,” Sulayman said. He motioned Niki into a chair.

Niki bowed and sat down, sitting erect on the edge of the seat, both hands on the arms of the chair, his feet flat on the carpet. Sulayman noted his tense posture and smiled slightly. Such attitudes pleased him. He did not trust a man who relaxed when he transacted business.

“Allow me to formally welcome you to Saudi Arabia, Mr. Tamani.” Sulayman took a folder from his desk and rested it in his lap.

Niki bowed his head slightly. “I am honored by your presence, Excellency.” He maintained his passive smile and never took his eyes from the Prince.

“As you probably suspect, you’ve been called to Riyadh because of your bid proposal for contractor security services within the kingdom.” Sulayman opened the folder then thumbed through several pages and rested his hand on the topmost sheet. He didn’t look at Niki when he spoke.

“You will be pleased to learn the Tokyo offices of Matsu Ltd. will receive notice of contract award in three days. Matsu will be contracted for total security services for seven on-shore field—Abqaiq, Abu Hadriya, Dammam, Fadhile, Ghawar, Khurais, and Khursaniyah.”

Niki stood and drew his slight figure to his full five-foot-two inches, a sudden tinge of color blushed his cheeks and his smile seemed to illuminate his features. He bowed his head several times before he spoke; an emotional hoarseness rode on his voice. “Thank you, your Excellency, thank you.”

Sulayman basked in the gushing of Niki’s emotional

response. He so loved the polite humility of the Japanese. The prince motioned for Niki to sit with a wave of his hand and glanced back at the open folder.

“There’s something else,” he added. “Your proposal did not provide for any security services in the Hijaz district. However, a special need has developed. Your staff will be requested to expand your bid estimate to include integrated security services for the port and city of Yanbu al Nawa. It’s a new city and industrial complex being built on the shores of the Red Sea, two-hundred miles north of Jeddah. Your amended proposal must include a plan and schedule.”

Niki’s heart pounded in his chest. Matsu Ltd., had been awarded the largest single security contract in Saudi Arabia; the gamble had paid off. His thoughts flashed back to the international security conference held in Paris last September. In a bold move, he’d approached Prince Sulayman with an unsolicited bid for security services at a price much lower than the fees the Saudi government was paying Heidrich A.G., the German security firm currently managing the contract.

As an inducement to encourage the Saudi prince to consider the bid, he sent a courier with a gift of respect; a ‘D’ color, two-carat, brilliant-cut diamond. Prince Sulayman granted him audience the following day.

Niki remembered the moment well...



Four months earlier they had sat on a glass-enclosed terrace of the Prince’s apartment. The heady scent of

sandalwood incense was in the air that day, and the facets of the diamond gift scintillated as Prince Sulayman rotated the stone in his fingers.

“Please be seated, Mr. Tamani,” the Prince said. “I’m impressed by your gift, this diamond has been cut with rare expertise. The proportion and faceting are flawless.”

Niki sat in a chair opposite the Prince and bowed his head in acknowledgement of the compliment. “It is the craft of my family,” he said in a polite tone. “They will be honored, Excellency.”

Prince Sulayman raised his eyebrows. “You are a jeweler? I assumed you were in the security business.”

“Security is my only business, Excellency. I am one of four vice-presidents of Matsu Ltd., we are devoted to offering the most efficient of industrial security on an international basis.” Niki paused a moment to clear his throat and let the statement settle. “And a premium covert service that solves impossible tasks of a confidential nature, for special clients who wish to remain anonymous.”

Again Niki paused, this time engaging the prince’s eyes in a manner that underscored his explanation.

“My relationship with the jewelry industry is that both sides of my family, my father and two uncles are master jewelers, as were my grandfathers and their fathers before them. My two brothers and I were apprenticed to my uncle, Senji Kamuzo, at an early age. He is a master diamond cutter and has a large cutting facility on the island of Penang, in Malaysia. My honored uncle labored hard to teach us the art, but I am

ashamed to admit that I was a disappointing apprentice. I did not have the ability to master the skill.”

Prince Sulayman nodded at the explanation and returned to inspecting the stone. “The ways of Allah are not always obvious,” he said. “But in the final analysis, his decision for one’s life path is always wise.”

Niki bowed his head slightly, but remained politely silent.

The prince placed the stone in an open jewelry case resting on the coffee table in front of him and looked at Niki a long moment before speaking. “Your gift is accepted with appreciation, as is your proposal for security services. Your background is indeed unique, Mr. Tamani. In a sense of extreme confidentiality, I wonder if you could provide me with a very special piece of jewelry?”

Niki smiled and bowed his head. “As I said, Excellency, all needs of special clients are confidential.”



Now, today, four months later, the prince’s personal confirmation of the contract award sent a rush of emotions racing through Niki. But regardless of his elation, the restraint of his Japanese culture kept an invisible hand on his shoulder. He maintained his poise, a pleasant smile, calm exterior, decorum, decorum, decorum. He politely bowed his head, never taking his eyes from the prince.

“Thank you, Excellency. Matsu Ltd. is your humble servant.”

Prince Sulayman closed the folder and leaned back in his chair. “One of the conditions of the contract is that you will be the program manager, and that you reside in-country, in Jeddah. Secondly, Matsu Ltd. must establish a commercial account in the Bahrain banking system.

“Be aware that this meeting is an exception. Royal protocol demands I rarely see vendors. Should you be asked the reason for this private audience, you must reply that it was necessary because of the magnitude of the contract. Do you understand?”

“Yes, your Excellency. I understand.”

Sulayman let his statement settle and appraised the effect on Niki. His features betrayed no emotion, but his mahogany-brown eyes took on the aura of a cobra observing a mouse—pondering, deciding. After a long moment, he reached beneath the underside of his desk and depressed two switches: the recorders and cameras, which maintained a record of every action and spoken word in the office, were disabled.

“Another reason for this audience is the discussion we had in Paris, four months ago,” Sulayman said. “Do you recall the special item and the specifications?”

Niki nodded and held his left arm upright in front of him. He pulled back the sleeve of his coat, revealing a gold watch.

“If I may approach your desk, Excellency?”

Sulayman nodded and Niki stepped to the front of the rosewood desk. He released the watchband, slipped the watch from his wrist, and placed it face-up on the desk in front of the prince. It looked like an expensive watch, the face was crafted from Lapis Lazuli; the gold

numbers were in Arabic script. There were two buttons on the side of the case: one milled like a winding stem, and the other smooth like a sweep second control.

Niki pointed at the watch. "The watch is quartz controlled, it is adjusted for time setting by internal controls. The milled stem fits into a sealed membrane inside the case. If you depress the smooth button, then twist the milled button half a turn you can withdraw the milled stem.

"The sealed membrane contains a virus that will survive for fifteen days, after that time, the membrane must be recharged. The tip of the milled stem is treated with a porous material that will carry one drop of the virus culture. The virus must contact a mucous membrane to survive and multiply, otherwise it will perish within thirty minutes after being exposed to the atmosphere. Once the virus is in the human body, death will follow in five to seven days. The effect of the virus will positively be diagnosed as pneumonia, but the body will not respond to traditional therapy. The virus mutates inside the human body and feeds upon itself, it will not survive long enough to be identified."

Sulayman picked up the watch and examined it, the obvious craftsmanship caused him to nod and smile.

"How is the virus applied?" he said. "You must have recommended techniques."

Niki nodded. "Yes. The most favorable transport is liquid; any fluid that is mildly acidic is extremely efficient. Water works well, but tends to be alkaline in most parts of the world, and alkalinity lowers the life span of the virus. In fact, that is the control; if you should allow

the virus to touch your skin, simply wash your hands with soap and water.”

Prince Sulayman slipped the watch on his wrist and snapped the detent on the band. He extended his arm in front of him and rolled his wrist, evaluating the cosmetic beauty of the lethal device.

“It is a handsome timepiece.” His smile had a markedly evil overtone. “Nice enough to befit a prince. Wouldn’t you say?”

Niki’s reserved smile spread to the grin of a Cheshire cat. He stepped back two paces from the desk and bowed from the waist. “Yes, your Excellency.”

Niki returned to his chair and assumed his attentive posture. Sulayman continued to inspect the wristwatch for several seconds, then lowered his arm and turned his chair to face Niki.

“And what is the price of this deadly toy?”

“It is a gift of gratitude, your Excellency, from a humble, but thankful employee.”

“I see” Sulayman said. “You are most generous.”

Once again, he narrowed his eyes and took on the aura of the cobra. He studied Niki for a long moment, then slowly vented a long breath and leaned his head back in his chair.

“I recall part of the conversation we had in Paris, Mr. Tamani. You said Matsu Ltd. had a special service for very select clients. I believe at one point you described it as ‘the unseen eyes of a stranger’. Could you expand on the nature and limits of this service?”

Niki felt the hairs on the back of his neck tingle, his pulse quickened but he gave no outward sign, only the

same benign smile. *The Arab fox! This is what he wanted.*

“Yes, your Excellency. It is a premium service offered to select clients who require the ultimate in discrete services of almost any nature. It is very expensive.”

“I’m interested. Possibly I have an application. Tell me more.”

“It is a covert branch of our security organization, a group of uniquely talented individuals. Each is highly trained in specialized arts and possesses intellect and abilities far beyond the average person. As a group, they represent almost every race and color on this planet. They are both male and female and multilingual, able to remain inconspicuous in any culture.”

“Are there limits? Anything they cannot accomplish, or situations they won’t penetrate?”

“Nothing, your Excellency. Nothing. Results are guaranteed.”

“You say guaranteed. What can you offer as a testimony to the value of this guarantee? Every organization has potential defectors. Wealth sways the most devoted of servants.”

“Our premium service has no living defectors, Excellency. The guarantee is verbal. I can offer you no record of what we have done, for that would defeat the very cornerstone of the service—eternal silence. I can only tell you in confidence that the *service* has been contracted well over two-thousand times in the past fifty-three years, in situations ranging from penetration of governments at diplomatic levels to simple partnership dissolutions. It has never failed, nor has it been detected.”

Prince Sulayman turned his head and stared at the heavens again for a long moment. When he spoke his voice was low, it carried a chilling timbre. "Understand one thing, Mr. Tamani. In the game I play, losers forfeit their lives." He swung in his chair and stared at Niki, clearly emphasizing the grim price of failure.

Niki remained calm, his eyes half-lidded as if in meditation. A slight hint of a smile twitched the corners of his mouth; he nodded.

Again, the prince fell silent, his eyes studying Niki's features. He picked up a string of green Malachite worry beads from his desk and manipulated them through his fingers for a long moment, as if they somehow gave him insight to the prudence of trusting this Japanese man. Finally, he dropped the beads to his desk and nodded.

"Mr. Tamani, I'm beset with a situation of extreme secrecy. It concerns two islands on our west coast. As grandson of Husayn ibn Ali, king of Hijaz, these islands and the lands of Hijaz were deeded to me. There is, at present, a power center in the royal family who wishes to develop one or both of these islands, to take my lands from me. This must not happen, at any cost."

The prince paused to take a four-by-five photograph from his desk drawer, which he placed in front of Niki.

"This power center has convinced the royal family to enlist the aid of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, and has provided facilities for them in Jeddah. This picture was taken two days ago at the Jeddah airport, just before these two men had a clandestine meeting with a representative of the royal family. The shorter man is General Wykopft, a man who reports di-

rectly to Washington, and who has considerable experience in low-profile military operations. The other man is a combat engineer, Colonel Samuel Givens. He's in charge of the project. He has a military record of being assigned to difficult situations, and a reputation of success.

"The royal family is shrewd. In bringing these foreign military specialists into the country, they place the project in a closed system. Information is not available. I have many ears in Hijaz, but none inside the American camp. This is where your services are needed. I must have a continuing flow of information from inside the American compound, and your agent must remain undetected."

Niki remained calm, his hands politely folded in his lap; not a flicker of emotion marred his features. He nodded silently. "There are severe limitations in depending on a single agent. We usually structure a delicate task like this with a network of people. It's far more efficient and reliable. I shall personally review this assignment and have my people in place within two weeks."

Prince Sulayman waved his hand, as if to brush aside the limitations and details.

"Use whatever people and resources you think necessary, but provide the information I require." He leaned forward, pointing his index finger at Niki as if it were a Damascus blade. His voice took on an icy chill. "There is one unbreakable requirement. You, and only you must pass the information to me personally. I shall make arrangements for you to meet with me in the desert north

of Yanbu al Bahr, at a small oasis beyond the surveillance of desert travelers. I shall schedule meetings as necessary. Your duties in organizing the security systems in Yanbu al Nawa will fit in with this very nicely and give you an excellent cover.”

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