

ONE

30 AUGUST
DOHA, QATAR

“Is he drunk yet?”

“He was drunk when he walked in here.” Amzi snorted in disgust. “So much for Ramadan, eh?”

Refael Gur sighed and turned away from the mess on the bed to stare out the floor-to-ceiling windows. Reduced to lights and geometric glows, central Doha wasn't as jumbled and homely at night as in daylight. The National Islamic Center's honey-lit spiral tower spiked above the dark low-rise shambles at its feet; the new city's Tomorrowland glitz wavered in the black mirror of Doha Bay. At least the Qataris were trying, more than he could say for the Arabs back home.

Reflected in the glass, Amzi—suit coat off, sleeves rolled up, half-empty bottle of vodka in one gloved hand—bent over the Hezbollah thug Talhami, watching Gur.

“How much longer before the scoline wears off?” Gur finally asked.

“It already has, but he's too drunk to do anything about it.” Amzi spread his hands. “Well?”

Gur glanced at the football game on the flat-screen television: Syria against China, Syria losing, thank God. “All right, get his clothes off.” He touched his Bluetooth earpiece. “Bring the woman in.”

Amzi pressed Talhami's fingers and palm against the bottle several times, then dumped it on the carpet and started roughly stripping the business suit off the muttering Arab. A

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few seconds later, a single knock on the door. Natan eased it open.

Kelila guided the whore by the arm into the hotel room. Gur gave her a once-over—skinny, pale, trembling, the face of a sixteen-year-old, body maybe fourteen—and shook his head. They'd worked hard to find this creature, trawling the guest-worker slums southwest of the city. The prostitutes who haunted downtown were much too healthy and well-paid. "All right, get her working."

The whore pointed at the now-naked Arab sprawled on the bed and squawked in Russian, "With him?"

Kelila patted the girl's shoulder, smiled. Gur looked between Kelila—a strapping, power-suited *sabra* woman—and the ragged little tart and wondered how they could be the same species. "Yes, dear," Kelila answered in Russian, "with him. Do a good job, and we'll give you your candy, yes?"

"Guard," Natan said. The word cut through the TV noise and Talhami's mumbling.

All the conscious people in the room fell silent. Amzi carefully slid the pistol from his shoulder holster, screwed on a suppressor. The whore probably didn't understand Hebrew but she caught the mood, her bloodshot eyes flicking this way and that, full of alarm.

Natan pressed against the door, pistol in both hands, eye pressed to the peephole. He wore the traditional white, ankle-length Qatari *thub* and red-and-white checked *qutra*; Gur thought of a well-armed Christmas tree angel.

"Gone," Natan reported. "Elevators." A chorus of released breaths answered him.

Kelila led the girl to the bed. "All right, dear, time to earn your money."

The girl pulled off what little she wore with hands that worked slightly out of synch. Gur winced at the needle tracks on her arms and the insides of her thighs, turned back to the window. Men *paid* to be with that scarecrow? No breasts, no rear, skinny legs and all? It wouldn't even be like being with a woman. He heard her stumble onto the bed,

Lance Charnes

saw the reflection of her bony back as she bent over Talhami's crotch.

Gur closed his eyes. *This is how I serve my country.*

A few minutes passed with only the TV sports announcers' play-by-play blathering to disturb the room. Other sounds from the bed broke through the lulls in the electronic noise; Gur did what he could to tune out the grotesque parody of intimacy. Finally, Kelila purred, "Good girl, you did fine. Here's a tissue. No, just stay there."

Gur blinked his eyes open, turned to the armchair next to him, pulled the clear plastic bag from his briefcase. He walked it to Kelila, who took it between her blue-gloved thumb and middle finger, like a dead mouse. The whore watched the bag's contents as if they were sent by God. She ripped it from Kelila's hand and pillaged the bag in seconds.

The three of them—Gur, Kelila next to him, Amzi beside the bed—watched with solemn faces as the girl tore open the tan balloon of heroin, dumped it into the metal spoon from the room's coffee tray, melted it with the cheap red plastic lighter. She half-filled the disposable syringe, yanked the rubber tube around her pipe-like upper arm, shot up, loosened the tube.

What went on in the beige luxury of high-end hotel rooms like this still amazed Gur, even after all these years. How much of his life had he spent surrounded by the million shades of hotel tan, waiting for something to happen, waiting for it to finish, waiting for the consequences, waiting to forget?

Kelila murmured to Gur, "Do you think they'll be proud of this? The people whose names we used?"

Gur tried not to watch the spindly Russian girl moan and twitch. "The question is, will *we* be proud?"

Ten minutes later, the whore was dead.

"I thought it would take more," Kelila said, sounding a bit queasy.

"One hundred percent pure, straight from Afghanistan." Gur considered the white, still jumble of skin-wrapped bones

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on the bed and sighed. “That dose would’ve put down a rhino.”

Amzi had already cooked up the Arab’s share. He shot half the syringe into Talhami’s arm with all the tenderness of an army nurse working a boot-camp vaccination line, dropped it onto the bedspread. Talhami rocked his head back and forth a few times, then stopped murmuring Arabic nonsense, then stopped breathing.

“Happy Eid, fuckhead,” Amzi said in Arabic, shoving his face close to the Arab’s. “Say ‘hi’ to all the people you killed on your way to Hell.”

Not a bad way to go, Gur thought. Better than having your body torn apart by shrapnel from a suicide bomber’s vest. Much better than burning alive in a bus, the way Gur’s wife Varda had. This piece-of-shit terrorist had arranged that and more. Gur should feel happy, triumphant, avenged. But the dish had been served too cold, and all he felt was indigestion.

“Right,” he said after a moment. “Sweep the place, make sure we don’t leave anything behind. Remember, English only from here on. I’ll see you back home in a week.” Gur allowed himself one last glance at the bed. He squeezed out a rote “Good work,” peeled off his latex gloves, and reminded himself to be Jacob Eldar again.

He didn’t look back as he marched from the room.