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Sanctuary

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Published by Orion

Extract

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Chapter 1

Zabqine, Southern Lebanon—October 2006

Glancing back at the remains of the mosque, Evelyn Bishop spotted him, half-hidden behind a shrapnel-encrusted wall, standing alone, the ever-present cigarette held between thumb and forefinger. The sight jarred her back to a distant past.

"Farouk?"

Even after all this time, it was unmistakably him. His eyes smiled tentatively back at her, confirming it.

Ramez—the diminutive, hyperactive ex-student of hers, now an assistant professor in her department and, handily for access to this part of the country, a Shi'ite—looked up from the cavity under the mosque's outer wall. Evelyn told him she'd be right back and made her way over to where the man stood.

She hadn't seen Farouk since they'd worked together on sweltering digs in Iraq twenty-odd years earlier. Back then, she was the tireless *Sitt* Evelyn, Lady Evelyn, young, vibrant, passionate about her work, a force of nature, running the excavations at the palace mound of Sennacherib in Nineveh and at Babylon, sixty miles south of Baghdad. He was simply Farouk, part of the digs' local entourage, a short, paunchy, balding chain-smoker, a dealer in antiquities and a "facilitator," the kind of fixer that any undertaking in that part of the world seemed to require. He'd

always been courteous, honest, and efficient, a quiet, self-effacing man who always delivered what he promised with a humble nod and never shied away from a troublesome request. But from the stooped shoulders, the furrows lining his forehead, and the few surviving wisps of gray where thick, black hair had once ruled, it was clear that the years hadn't been overly generous to him. Then again, Iraq hadn't exactly been experiencing a golden age of late.

"Farouk," she said, beaming. "How are you? My God, how long has it been?"

"A very long time, *Sitt* Evelyn."

Not that he was ever a fountain of ebullience, but his voice was, she thought, markedly subdued. She couldn't pin down the look on his face. Was the aloofness simply due to the intervening years, or was it something else?

A hint of unease crept through her. "What are you doing here? Do you live here now?"

"No, I only left Iraq two weeks ago," he replied somberly, before adding, "I came to find you."

His answer threw her. "To find me . . . ?" She was now certain that something was definitely wrong. That his eyes were darting around nervously in between sharp drags on his cigarette added to her concern. "Is everything alright?"

"Please. Can we . . . ?" He beckoned her away from the mosque and led her around a corner to a more discreet, sheltered corner.

She followed him, eyeing the ground warily, ever alert for the small cluster bomblets that littered the whole region. Watching Farouk's furtive glances at the village's main road down the hill, it was clear to her that he was on the lookout for an entirely different threat. Through the small alleys, Evelyn glimpsed the activity down the slope—trucks unloading relief supplies, makeshift tents being erected, cars making their way through the chaotic scene at a snail's pace, all of it punctuated by the occasional distant explosion, a constant reminder that although the thirty-four-day war was officially over and the cease-fire was in place, the conflict was far from resolved—but couldn't see what he was worried about.

"What's going on?" she asked. "Are you alright?"

He glanced around, again making sure that they weren't being watched, then flicked his cigarette away and pulled out a small, tattered brown envelope from his jacket pocket.

He handed it to her and said, "I brought these for you."

She opened the envelope and pulled out a small stack of photographs. They were Polaroids, slightly bent and worn.

Evelyn raised her eyes at Farouk quizzically, although her instincts were already telegraphing her what the pictures would show. She'd barely started flipping through the first few photos when her worst fears were confirmed.



She'd moved to Lebanon in 1992, just as the country was emerging from a long and ultimately pointless civil war. She'd decamped to the Middle East shortly after graduating from Berkeley in the late 1960s. She'd been working on a series of digs in Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt when a teaching position opened up at the American University of Beirut's Archaeology Department. Coupled with the potential to participate actively in the excavations of the newly accessible downtown area of the city, an alluring possibility considering its Phoenician, Greek, and Roman history, it was an opportunity she couldn't pass up. She applied for and got the job.

Now, a decade and a half later, Beirut was firmly and irrevocably home. She knew she'd live out her years here and die here, and the thought didn't displease her. The country had been good to her, and she'd more than returned the favor. A small cabal of enthusiastic and passionate students would attest to that, as would the city's revitalized museum. During the reconstruction of the downtown area, she'd butted heads with the developers and their bulldozers and tirelessly lobbied the government and the international monitors of UNESCO. She'd won some battles and lost others, but she'd made a difference. She'd been an intrinsic part of the rebirth of the city, of the whole country. She'd experienced the optimism as well as the cynicism, the selflessness and the corruption, the generosity and the greed, the hope and the despair, a whole cocktail of raw human emotions and instincts, unveiled and exposed with little consideration for modesty or shame.

And then this disaster.

Both Hezbollah and the Israelis had grossly miscalculated, and predictably, innocent civilians paid the price. That summer, barely a few weeks earlier, Evelyn had watched the Chinooks and the warships ferrying out the trapped foreigners with a lump in her throat, but it had never occurred to her to join them. She was home.

In the meantime, there was a lot of work to do. Classes were scheduled to resume in just over a week, one month later than normal. The summer term's courses had had to be rescheduled. Some faculty members wouldn't be coming back. The next few months would be an organizational challenge, with, occasionally, a curious distraction to take in, such as the one that had brought her here, today, to Zabqine, a sleepy town in the rolling hills of south Lebanon, less than five miles from the Israeli border.

The town itself was only there in name. Most of its houses had been reduced to mounds of gray rubble, twisted iron rods, and melted glass. Others had simply been obliterated, swallowed up by the black holes of laser-guided bombs. The bulldozers and trucks had moved in swiftly, clearing away the debris—more macabre landfill for some beachfront hotel development. The bodies of those who had died under the pancaked floors of their homes had been buried, and defiantly, the town was now showing tentative signs of life. The survivors, those who had managed to leave before the onslaught, were moving back, living in makeshift tents while figuring out how to rebuild. The power supply wouldn't be back for a long time, but at least a water tank had been trucked in to provide drinking water. A small line of villagers waited their turn there patiently, plastic containers and bottles in hand, while others emptied supplies from a couple of UNIFIL trucks that had brought in food and other basic supplies. Kids ran around, playing—of all games—war.

Ramez had driven her down to the village that morning. He was from a nearby town himself. An elderly local man, the only villager to have stayed in Zabqine during the bombing—it had left him half-deaf—had led them up the carpet of shattered masonry to the remains of the small mosque. Even though Ramez had described it to her, the sight that greeted her when they finally reached the hilltop was still unsettling.

The mosque's green dome had somehow survived the bombs that

had wrecked the rest of the small, stone structure. It just sat there, propped up bizarrely on top of the debris, a surreal installation that only war can conjure up. The shredded strips of what once was the mosque's red carpet fluttered eerily from the bare branches of nearby trees.

In pulling down the mosque's walls, the bombs had ripped the earth open, revealing a crevasse under its rear boundary, and exposing a previously hidden chamber underneath. The biblical frescoes on its walls, though faded and eaten away by time, were unmistakable. It was a pre-Islamic church, buried under the mosque. According to the Bible, the coast was well traveled by Jesus and his followers and was dotted with relics from biblical times. The church of St. Thomas, close by in Tyre, was built on what was thought to be the oldest church anywhere on record, a first-century edifice built by Saint Thomas upon his return from Cyprus. But Islam had swept over the region in the late seventh century, and many places of worship had been supplanted and taken over by the new faithful.

Poking around a Shi'ite shrine for the remnants of another, earlier faith wasn't going to be easy, especially not now, with the war still a fresh, gaping wound, and with emotions running even higher than they normally were.

Evelyn had imagined the day would be challenging.

But not in this way.

A GALE OF DISAPPOINTMENT swept through her. She looked at Farouk with undisguised sadness in her eyes. "What are you doing, Farouk?" she asked softly. "You know me better than this."

The Polaroids in Evelyn's hands showed hastily taken images of artifacts, treasures of a bygone age, relics from the cradle of civilization: cuneiform tablets, cylinder seals, alabaster and terra-cotta figurines, pottery vessels. She'd seen many similar shots since American troops had stormed into Baghdad in 2003 and international outrage had erupted over their failure to secure the city's museum and other sites of cultural importance. Looters had run amok, accusations of inside jobs and political machinations were made, withdrawn, and reinstated, and estimates of the number of stolen objects had rocketed up and down with breathless

unreliability. One thing was certain: Treasures dating back thousands of years had undeniably been stolen, some had been returned, but most were still missing.

"Please, *Sitt* Evelyn—" Farouk pleaded.

"No," she cut him off harshly, pushing the Polaroids back into his hands. "Come on. You're bringing me these—what? You really expect me to buy them or help you sell them?"

"Please," he repeated softly. "You have to help me. I can't go back there. Here." He was hectically going through them, looking for something. "Look at this."

Evelyn noticed his yellowed fingers were shaking. She studied his face, his body language—he was clearly frightened, as he should be. Smuggling ancient artifacts out of Iraq carried some rather severe penalties, penalties that could prove fatal depending on which side of what border one was apprehended on. But something was nagging at her. Admittedly, she didn't know this man intimately and hadn't seen him in years, but she thought she had a pretty good handle on understanding people and what they were made of, and for him to stoop to participating in the pillaging of his country, a country she remembered him caring about deeply . . . Then again, she hadn't lived through several bloody overthrows and three major wars, and all the horrors in between. She reined in her judgmental instincts and had to admit she had no idea of what his life must have been like since she last saw him. And what desperate measures people resorted to in order to survive.

He pulled a couple of shots from the pack and his eyes settled on her again. "Here."

She watched him as she drew a calming breath, nodded, and turned her attention to the photographs he was handing her.

The first shot showed several old codices lying flat on what looked like a table. Evelyn examined it more closely. Without being able to look inside the books, it was hard to tell how old they were. The region had such a rich history, pretty much a continuous parade of civilizations stretching over several thousand years. A few telltale details, however, hinted at their age: They had cracked leather covers, some of them gold-tooled and others stamped with geometric designs, mandorla medallions, and pendants. Ridges running over the lacings across their spines

were also clearly visible, all of it placing the books as pre–fourteenth century. Which made them potentially very, very attractive to museums and collectors.

She moved on to the second shot and froze with a chill of recognition. She brought the photograph up closer, studying it intently, her fingers brushing over it in a futile attempt to make it clearer, her mind trying to swim through the deluge of memories that the image had triggered: It showed an ancient codex, sitting innocently between two other old books. Its tooled-leather cover cracked and dusty. The leather envelope flap of the back cover was extended out. A distinctive feature of medieval Islamic books, it was normally tucked in under the front cover when the book was closed, used as a bookmark as well as to preserve and protect its pages.

Taken at face value, there was nothing remarkable about the old book, except for the symbol tooled into its cover: the ringlike, circular motif of a snake feeding on its own tail.

Evelyn's eyes shot up to meet Farouk's gaze. She couldn't fire off the words fast enough. "Where did you find these?"

"I didn't. Abu Barzan, an old friend of mine, did. He also deals in antiquities. He has a small shop in Al-Mawsil," Farouk explained, using the Arabic name for the town Mosul, a couple of hundred miles northeast of Baghdad. "Nothing illegal, you know, only what we were allowed to sell, under Saddam." Exporting the most valued antiquities, preinvasion, was the exclusive turf of Ba'ath Party officials. The rabble—the rest of the population—were left to fight over the crumbs. "Saddam had informants everywhere, as you know. Now it's different, of course. Anyway, my friend came to see me in Baghdad, around a month ago. He goes around the north, to old villages, looking for pieces. He's half-Kurd, and when he's there, he conveniently forgets his half-Sunni side, and they open their houses to him. Anyway, he'd come across these pieces—you know how it is now. It's a huge mess. Total chaos. Bombs, killings, death squads . . . People running around scared, doing what they have to do to keep out of danger and put bread on the table. Selling what they can, especially now that they can sell them openly. But there aren't many buyers, not inside Iraq anyway. Anyway, Abu Barzan had this collection he was trying to sell. He wanted to leave the country,

settle somewhere safe—we all do—but it takes money. So he was asking around, quietly, looking for a buyer. He knew I had some good contacts outside the country. He offered to split the proceeds with me."

Farouk lit up another cigarette, glancing around furtively as he did.

"Anyway, I thought of you when I saw the Ouroboros," he added, reaching out and tapping the snapshot of the codex. "I called around to see if anyone knew where you were. Mahfouz Zacharia—"

"Of course," Evelyn interjected. She'd kept in touch with the curator of the National Museum of Antiquities in Baghdad. Especially post-invasion, when the whole looting scandal had erupted. "Farouk, you know I can't touch these. We shouldn't be having this conversation."

"You have to help me, *Sitt* Evelyn. Please. I can't go back to Iraq. It's worse than you imagine. You want this book, don't you? I'll get it for you. Just help me stay here, please. You can use a driver, can't you? An assistant? I'll do anything. I can be useful, you know that. Please. I can't go back there."

She winced. "Farouk, it's not that easy." She shook her head faintly and glanced at the desolate hills sweeping away from the mosque. Along a small stone wall, row upon row of brown tobacco leaves, threaded onto wires months ago to dry in the summer sun, lay there, rotten and grayed, covered in the same thick dust that smothered the entire region. Overhead, the faint buzz of an Israeli drone rose and died with the breeze, a constant reminder of the simmering tension.

Farouk's face darkened. His breathing was now shorter and faster, his hands agitated. "You remember Hajj Ali Salloum?"

Another name from the past. An antiques dealer too, if Evelyn's memory was correct—which it usually was. Based in Baghdad. His shop was three doors down from Farouk's. She remembered them being close, though staunchly competitive when it came to clients and sales.

"He's dead." Farouk's voice was quivering. "And I think it's because of this book."

Evelyn's expression clouded as she struggled for words. "What happened to him?"

A sharper fear flickered in his eyes. "What is this book about, *Sitt* Evelyn? Who else is after it?"

Consternation flooded her voice. "I don't know."

"What about Mr. Tom? He was working on it with you. Maybe he

knows. You need to ask him, *Sitt* Evelyn. Something very bad is happening. You can't send me back there."

The mention pricked Evelyn's heart. Before she could answer him, Ramez's voice echoed through the mounds of rubble around them.

"Evelyn?"

Farouk shot her an anxious glare. She craned her neck to see Ramez appear, making his way over from the mosque. She glanced back at Farouk, who was looking down through the alleyways, towards the main street. When he turned back to face her, the blood seemed to have drained from his face. He shot her a look of such terror that she felt her heart constrict. He pushed the small stack of photos and the envelope into her hands and just said, "Nine o'clock, downtown, by the clock tower. Please come."

Ramez reached them, clearly wondering what was going on.

Evelyn fumbled for words, unsure about what to say. "Farouk's an old colleague of mine. From the old days, in Iraq." Ramez seemed clearly aware of the unease hovering over them. Evelyn sensed Farouk was making a move and reached out to him reassuringly. "It's okay. Ramez and I work together. At the university."

She was doing her best to telegraph to him that her colleague wasn't a threat, but something had visibly spooked Farouk, who just nodded furtively at Ramez before telling her with an insistent, pleading voice, "Please be there." And before she could object, he was already scrambling up the path, away from the town center, heading towards the mosque.

"Wait, Farouk!" Evelyn sidestepped away from Ramez and called out after him, but to no avail. He was already gone.

She turned back to Ramez, who seemed mystified. She suddenly remembered that the Polaroids were still in her hand, in plain sight for him, and he'd noticed them. He looked a question at her. She stuffed them in the envelope and pocketed it quickly while conjuring up a disarming smile.

"Sorry about that. He's just . . . It's a long story. Shall we get back to the chamber?"

Ramez nodded politely and led her back up the path.

She followed him, her eyes distant, the pit of her stomach garroted by Farouk's unsettling words, her mind too overwhelmed to register a

fleeting image from the town below: two men, standing by the edge of the road, a hard, stone-dead look in their eyes—not uncommon given the setting or the context, an expression she'd gotten used to seeing since the war—and yet, somehow disconnected to the activity around them, looking up in her direction, before one of them got into a car that drove off rather abruptly, the other catching her eye momentarily before moving off and disappearing behind a collapsed house.