

The Alexandria Scrolls

By

LUKMAN CLARK

SIX

STICKS
PRODUCTIONS

Riverside, CA

The Alexandria Scrolls

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by Lukman Clark

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Riverside, CA

A fast-paced, action-packed novel, with well-developed characters, and an
enthralling plot.”

--5 Stars Readers Choice Book Award

TO LINDA

My love

My wife

My Editor-in-Chief

Words cannot express my love

Nor my gratitude

“Since you came to birth in this world at this time, in this place, and with this particular destiny, it was this indeed that you wanted and required for your own ultimate illumination. That was a great big wonderful thing that you thereupon brought to pass: not the "you" of course, that you now suppose yourself to be, but the "you" that was already there before you were born. You are not now to lose your nerve! Go on through with it and play your own game all the way!”

—Joseph Campbell, Myths to Live By

THE ALEXANDRIA SCROLLS

Chapter 1

If Sim was an angel he certainly was an obnoxious one. Given I didn't believe in angels though, maybe he was just what I needed.

I was down two and a half pints of Chronic Ale at Gallagher's on Broadway in Long Beach, having hardly touched my order of Irish tacos. I used to meet here with a friend or two every other week or so just for this. Because it was the middle of a Tuesday afternoon however the pub was empty but for me. Just as well seeing I was feeling a little sorry for myself.

With a deep sigh I closed my eyes while taking in a deep breath. Upon exhaling, when I reopened my eyes, a stranger I had not heard approach was standing beside my table staring down at me.

"You're Owen Blake's boy, ain't ya."

"Huh?"

"Mind if I join ya, mate?"

"Uh..."

"I'm guessing I don't need to ask how ya' goin', seeing as here you're drinking all by your lonesome. By the way, call me Sim, if ya' like."

“Um. Excuse me but...”

“Crikey, mate! Like I said, you’re the spittin’ image of your daddy.”

“OK. So I’ve been told. But how did you know my father and why are you here?”

“Right. Well, we did a bit of work together back in OZ.”

“That must have been some time ago. You have to know he’s been dead 20 years now, right?”

“Course. So, whattaya say we get down to business.”

Sim extended a large, sunburned, calloused hand to me. At this point, I felt the need for some company so shook the hand and gestured for its owner to sit down. As he did so the waitress appeared and I ordered a pint for each of us. Looking across at the man, I judged he might be around 60 and could pass for any working class white guy, dressed in a faded denim shirt, Levi’s and work boots. Maybe the kind of guy who mostly minded his own business and would never hurt a fly. Maybe, except for the two-legged variety. Which is why I was curious he had sidled up to me out of nowhere. That and the fact he claimed he knew my dad.

Once our drinks arrived we settled in for what mostly was not very serious conversation. He asked me the usual questions like what kind of work I did, was I or had I ever been married and what sort of plans I had for my future. Then he

asked me why I was sitting in a pub all by myself when he could see I was such a good looking young fellow just like my daddy and should be enjoying my youth while I still could.

I ordered another round of drinks, more for myself than for him since he had not touched his first one – so unlike what I had heard about Aussies -- and the more questions Sim asked about my life the more ale I felt I needed. It was this last question that made me flush. Having told Sim so much about myself already, I admitted I had been expecting my girlfriend to join me for a couple of weeks but she cancelled our rendezvous at the last minute saying she had to start a new project. This, I conjectured, was the problem with a bi-continental relationship, with me in the U.S. and she in the south of France. For some reason, this explanation seemed to set Sim off. Suddenly dropping his previous friendly tone and reassuring comments, he gritted his teeth and leaned across the table to say,

“Mate, I see now you’re not at all like your daddy. Look like him, yeahnah, but ya’ don’t know your arse from your elbow far as I can tell. So, here’s a bit of advice: to find yourself you’re gonna have to lose the self you think ya’ are. You can bet two prawns and a lobster on that.”

I had no idea what he was talking about but felt an urgent need to visit the Gents. I stood up to go but before excusing myself I shot a question back at Sim.

“You said you and my dad used to work together, right? What kind of work did you do?”

“Finding.”

“What do you mean? Finding what?”

“Whatever kinds of treasure folks wanted found and had the dollarydoos to pay us for finding it.”

When I returned to my table Sim was gone and there was no sign of him in the place. I decided to go out to walk off the alcohol before returning home. While putting cash for the drinks and a tip on the table, I noticed a napkin with something written on it next to my empty glass. It looked like my phantom Aussie philosopher had left me a message. In his best Ozian scrawl he had written what looked to be an international telephone number with a big, dark underline beneath it he obviously had drawn over several times.

This was the start of what turned out to be an unexpectedly long journey.

Chapter 2

An LAX-bound Qantas A380 lumbered over the 405 freeway just as KNX news reported on some other plane lost over the Pacific, with no word on the fate of its passengers. Cars behind me honked their horns, one driver briefly pulling up on my right with his window down, the better to inform me what an asshole I was. The Doberman in his backseat glared out its window to let me know what it would do to me if its owner forced me over to the shoulder. Lucky for me, the car accelerated to pull in front. Road rage did not win out – this time. Either that or the driver could not be bothered.

I had not realized how much I had slowed down and become the very thing I often vent against on L.A.'s packed freeways. It's just those big jets coming in so low always make me nervous. Getting back into the flow, I headed for the Mulholland entrance into Bel Air where I had an appointment with a world-renowned hypnotherapist.

My hypnosis session took place under the guidance of Dr. Clara d'Uccelli in the hills behind the UCLA campus where I had spent many years as student, researcher and sometime lecturer. My reason for trying hypnotherapy was to shed light on certain inexplicable vivid "memories" -- almost like being in a movie -- that had come to me over the years. Fragmented images rose, like long forgotten memories struggling to the surface, gasping for breath and sinking back down again. Only the memories weren't mine. They were like pieces of other people's lives suddenly

spilling over into mine. Or I had to consider they were my lives and I was seeing them through the proverbial glass darkly.

While the details of that afternoon with Sim were foggy in my head, I think I must have shared some of these in our drinking bout – OK, my drinking bout -- and that's why he said and did what he did. I called the number on the napkin, half expecting to reach some sales boiler room touting something I couldn't live without or another hot investment offering like I'm always getting. I'm glad I made the call because after a man's voice told me to please hold, a few moments later a woman with an irresistible Italian accent came on the line. I started to explain about Sim and how I came by her number but she interrupted me with,

“*Si, sì*. I know. The fact you called this number tells me all. My name is *Dottore* d'Uccelli and you have – what shall we say – disturbing memories? *È giusto?*”

“Uh, yes, but not memories like other memories. I mean it's like they play out right in front of me like on a movie screen.”

“If you please, such things are my specialty. Tell me a little more about these memories that come to you.”

Dr. d'Uccelli's voice was the kind that immediately puts one at ease and made me feel easier with each passing moment. I began to open up to her, though a complete stranger.

“Well, each is very distinctive. I mean each one clearly belongs to a different time and place.”

“And you know this how?”

“You know, by the way people are dressed, for instance. Also, none of them look anything like people I know or see nowadays, except maybe in pictures and paintings from older times but in 3-D or like IMAX. I sense, too, they speak different languages though no one actually speaks. They just feel very different. Immersive, you know?”

“What do you think is the meaning of such things?”

“No offense, Dr. d’Uccelli, but I’m guessing that’s why I was given your number. I was hoping maybe you might be able to tell me what this is all about. Am I just going crazy or what?”

“*Si, si, signore*. I understand. I really do. Yet, it is helpful for me to know your thoughts on your experiences. To better let me know—how can I say it—where you are coming from?”

“OK. Sorry. You’re right. Well, part of me thinks or wants to believe these pertain to past lives I may have had. There. I’ve said it. And I want to know if they are in any way real or if they are a sign of something else. Something deeper that may be wrong with me. You see, these memories or whatever aren’t the kinds you often read about in the tabloids. You know, where someone says they’re the reincarnation of some famous person out of history. Napoleon, Cleopatra. Socrates. The usual cast of characters. Mine are more Joe-the-Plumber variety. Just a regular guy or, huge surprise to me, a woman struggling day-to-day with all the cards stacked against him or her. In the end though, just like the famous people, every one of me died. Just like we all do, right?”

“*Molto bello!* Of course, there are but so many famous historical personalities to go around, so it is logical most of us are of the historically forgotten or common people. Your understanding of this sets you apart from most people I treat. You show impressive progress. Let me assure you though no matter how disturbing the images, the information, you have received, it only appears nonsensical to you because you lack context for it.

“*Così, signore*, I am here to help you. But tell me this, do any of these lives stand out from the rest, perhaps feeling more important somehow?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe not important so much as just different. Like I’m seeing someone, a woman, who also seems to see me but we can’t cut through the mist separating us.”

“*Io vedo. Molto interessante.* And does this woman seem to you like anyone in your present life? Perhaps like your mother or a sister?”

“No. Not at all. For one thing, I am an only child and have no sister.”

“*Bene.* Possibly someone you are yet to encounter. We shall see.”

It turned out the Bel Air location for my session was the posh home of another well-known psychotherapist. It was the sort of place I never would have wanted for myself. Nice enough but in the wrong location. In the hills away from everything and everybody.

Upon arriving I was greeted by Dr. d’Uccelli herself, standing outside on the front walkway. Dressed in what passes for upscale California casual—dark slacks, a

soft, cream colored blouse with the top two buttons undone and low heels—her bearing was nonetheless professionally compelling and it took me a couple beats to respond, after which we shook hands, commented on the weather, and then she ushered me through a gate to the side of the house. An older woman, familiar somehow, whom I took to be the resident therapist, stood on a small brick patio surrounded by flowering trees and an array of native plants. This other woman motioned me to enter a pair of opened, glass-paned French doors into what must have been her work space.

“Dr. Bourne, this is Mr. Brandon Blake, who has come to begin training with me. Signore Blake, let me introduce you to Dr. Charlotte Bourne. Dr. Bourne is my mentor and longtime friend. I hope you do not mind if she sits in with us?”

I absently nodded this was OK by me because in my head I was trying to decipher what Dr. d’Uccelli meant by training but decided it must just be her way of expression in English. On top of this, I found it hard to take my eyes off Dr. d’Uccelli. So as not to be obviously ogling her, I looked around at Dr. Bourne’s office in between glances at Dr. d’Uccelli. The office was sparsely furnished but felt welcoming and comfortable. Especially given the large, cushiony recliner sporting various levers and buttons on it. It made me think how far we had come from the fabled shrink’s couch of talk therapy fame and also how much I would like for Dr. d’Uccelli to invite me to lie down on it right then. Among the usual things found in offices, there were two less comfortable-looking straight-backed chairs and a small table next to the recliner. The table held a recording device.

Dr. d’Uccelli brushed a strand of blond hair from her cheek and recited the content of our earlier phone conversation to set the stage and presumably to put me at my ease. She then went into a ten minutes or so explanation of the purpose of past life regression and how it is done and what I could expect. As she spoke, I was able to check her out more closely without coming off as a creep.

I already knew something of her reputation and that she currently was making a lecture and publicity tour in the US to promote her latest book on motivational behaviors, which explained why we were meeting in some other doctor’s office. In addition to lectures and books to help people find their life’s direction, she selectively offered for those who can pay her considerable fees an opportunity to delve into past lives. The idea is to use hypno-regression for uncovering blockages and potentially useful character attributes.

While I had seen on-line photographs of Dr. d’Uccelli—of Clara, with whom I had no difficulty fantasizing about a continuing relationship as time went on—I experienced a nagging sense of *déjà trouvé* as I stood next to the real woman. Publicity photos did not do her justice. In those she appeared to my mind like a taller version of the actress Monica Vitti. In her early forties, Clara’s body looked quite toned and her handshake had been firm. At first sight of the flesh and blood woman however I felt somehow both diminished and challenged by a tremendous depth of soul. On top of being drop-dead gorgeous and holding several advanced degrees and international certifications, there clearly was much more to this woman than met the eye. In fact, I was finding it difficult to meet the steady gaze of her

rain-cloud gray eyes as she spoke, as though something in her was also checking me out and daring me to be someone very different from the man I think I am.

When she finished her introductory explanations, that went right by me, Clara had me remove my sport coat, which I draped over the back of one of the chairs. She then suggested I loosen my tie and shirt collar, as well as take off my shoes. Following her directions, I next laid back on the recliner. It was as relaxing as it looked. She touched a lever, lowering the back so my view panned from the outside garden to the blank ceiling. Lightly punching some buttons along the side of the arm nearest her, the chair gently molded itself to my body.

Suddenly, I was no longer on some kind of Lay-Z-Boy chair. I felt as though restrained in what I imagine a star pilot's hi-G flight couch might be like. However the trip I'd signed on for was not into space. I was in a time machine and, having started the recorder, Clara's soothing voice had already begun the launch sequence.

Before meeting Clara, had anyone asked, I would have said like most people might that I probably could never be hypnotized. In fact, lying back in that cushiony chair, I realized maybe I had good reason to avoid hypnosis. It was not so much a worry I would start flapping my arms and squawking like a chicken as what might come screaming out of my subconscious mind unbidden. I've always prided myself on being self-contained and in control. Suffice it to say, she quickly got me under the spell of her serene contralto voice. Being cradled by both the high-tech couch and Clara's words, my body awareness heightened. I caught the scent of her

perfume, which felt almost mind-altering in itself. The perfume pulled me in contradictory directions, being at once classical and primeval it both heightened my interest in her and made me want to sink deeper into the trance. Along with the purr of central air conditioning, it created a complex harmonic beneath Clara's voice. Cool air from a wall vent caressed my face. Clara helped me realize how all such physical sensations and feelings change from second to second, minute to minute, hour to hour. Yet I remained me. It was the same with emotions and thoughts. In their random ebb and flow—I remained.

She prompted me to see I was like the vast blue sea. My sensations, feelings, emotions and thoughts are the fish swimming in the sea. They are part of the sea, but the sea is distinct from them. Creatures come and go. The sea remains.

I remain.

Clara took me on a wonderful visit to an inner landscape. I got to choose whether this would be a forest, a beach, a garden or wherever. I chose a garden. One I remembered and played in when I was very little. When both my parents were alive. Clara reminded me the garden was safe. It was familiar and warm and friendly. Filled with the sounds of birds and bugs going about their natural business as a soft breeze gently breathed through the trees.

Clara next had me imagine a pergola in the center of the garden. From this central structure, many paths radiated like the sun's rays in a child's drawing. She asked me to choose one of the paths. Which one did not matter. They were equally interesting. Equally safe. Each disappeared into an enfolding mist.

Despite Clara's reassurances I had some trepidation about committing to a path. The mist ahead sent out long, snaky tendrils from different directions. What if this turned out to be the beginning of some Lovecraftian nightmare? But I was in too deep now to quit. I inhaled deeply. Cool vapors filled me and enveloped my body and my mind. One of the coiling strand drew me forward. Finally—

“Brandon. Open your eyes. What do you see?”

“I'm looking into the mouth of a large, dark cave.”

“A cave. What are you doing there?”

“I'm holding an old sand-blasted wooden chest in my arms.”

“Excellent. Please look at your arms. Tell me about them. Are they young or old looking? Do you have strong arms?”

“My arms are brown. Darker because I've been out in the desert sun. Yes, I am a young man. Not overly muscular, but strong.”

“So, you are in the desert? And the cave is in the desert, is that right?”

“Desert, yes, but rocky with scrub vegetation. Not like that to the south. My work brought me here.”

“Where is this rocky desert? What kind of work do you do there?”

I took a long while to respond to these last questions. Getting my bearings in both time and geography. Finally, I answered.

“I am in what is now the country of Libya. In the northeast corner, not far from the coast. I am an Arab, a scientist and engineer working in agriculture and

irrigation. This seems to be sometime in the Christian ninth century, so one to two hundred years after the death of Prophet Muhammad. [*Salaah allah ealayh wasulam.*]"

"What did you say? At the end? It sounded like Arabic. Is this a language you know?"

"Yes, of course I speak Arabic...but Brandon does not."

"Interesting. Let's return to why you are there and why you are holding the old chest."

"I found the chest while mapping out traces of ancient waterways running through the desert. I'm hoping to find an underground aquifer. I intend to hide the chest in this cave."

"Why is that? Why hide it? Do you know what it contains?"

"I do. Yes, because I opened it. The chest holds several thick scrolls. They have Greek writings on them."

"How do you know this? You have studied Greek, perhaps?"

I explained how the young Arab did not understand Greek but had seen writing like this on his way through Cairo and Alexandria. He thought the scrolls might have historical value, so he decided to stash them in the cave. He would bring them to the imam in the village who was more learned after his work was completed.

“So, let’s say you have hidden the box in the cave. When did you return for them?”

“Never. I never made it back to the village. It’s now night and wild dogs have circled me. Three of them. Silent. Their eyes shine horribly in the light of my fire. The dogs are nightmarish with strange black and white stripes over yellowish patches. Their ears are big and bat-like. Their snouts black. I’m petrified. I have only a knife for protection. Before I can even begin to reach for it, they attack! Oh, my God! Help me!”

Clara quickly removed me from the scene. Still in a trance, I was nonetheless tremendously agitated. My whole body trembled forcefully, knowing I had just suffered a gruesome death, eaten alive by vice-like mandibles. Fortunately, the pain of steel jaws ripping open my throat and abdomen already was fading from my consciousness.

As these memories receded I realized I had seen where a trove of ancient scrolls might still be hidden. This knowledge and Clara’s helped to draw me back to the present. She counted down slowly from ten, until I was once again awake on the recliner. After sitting me up, she debriefed me while the other therapist just observed. Pouring tea for the three of us, Clara soothed me further with a reminder as far as death and dying go, we all have been through it many times in many ways. I

had said as much to her myself earlier. And just like with our passing thoughts and emotions, so do our lives come and go. Through them all however – we remain.

I began to feel calmer, eventually reorienting myself to our 21st century surroundings. Sitting up in Dr. Bourne's time machine, I felt to discuss the business side of the session just passed, that this would help me pull myself together more. Clara waved this aside, letting me know there was plenty of time to discuss such mundanities. Her eyes seemed to glow with an inner light while she suppressed a smile.

“Please, do not worry yourself about my payment for now. I am intrigued by your experience. Never before has a person indicated finding a lost object as you have. Do you remember anything else about it, now you are back into your current life?”

“Well, I do have a sense I recognized something written on the outside of one of the scrolls, but I can't say for sure. I can tell you the image of that cave entrance is fairly burnt into my mind's eye. Do you think there really is a place like that?”

“Brandon, I do not know why but I feel somehow connected with your vision and that I should help you determine if the cave is real and since so much time has passed if it still exists. But only if this satisfactory to you.”

I swung my feet over to the floor, slipped my shoes back on and stood up, rolling my head to loosen my neck so recently ripped open. Clara leaned in with a quizzical smile. I looked back at her and said,

“I think I would like that.”

Feeling like my insides were vibrating, I thought to myself that my father would want me to find this treasure chest, too.

Chapter 3

The canine-thing stood upright on hind legs in the middle of shimmering heat waves rippling off the tarmac. About fifty yards from the ramp stairs, the creature stared curiously at me with golden-brown eyes. Its variegated, skewbald pelt and lupine face confirmed this was no ordinary dog looking to feed off scraps from humans.

As the last of half a dozen passengers to descend from the cabin I lingered, light-headed, at the bottom of the stairs, my right hand still firmly gripping the rail while I oriented myself. Bright sunlight blinded me and the hangover effects of Ambien had me still punchy. Being 30,000 feet away from solid ground always makes me nervous, so I need one drug or another to forget where I am.

Putting on my Ray-Ban's, I looked again for the dog-creature. It was gone. No trace. Guide books describe Labraq International Airport in Libya as primitive but serviceable. Despite my dread of flying I have been in a lot of airports but none like this one. So far, it seemed like hell to me and I'm sure there was no First Class lounge here in which to get myself together. Hazily, I wondered what I had gotten myself into.

Despite my stupefaction, I was just glad to be back on the ground and I really had no intention of sticking around the terminal. Clara had said I should get in and out as quickly as I could. I landed here just to catch my ride to the coast and move on. Once at my destination, I hoped to discover proof of my past life from over a thousand years ago and possibly complete some deeper mission.

My target was northeast of the town of Labraq in the mysterious and, I was warned, likely dangerous Green Mountains region. As soon as I hooked up with my guide Ahmed in the dusty terminal, he grabbed my one carry-on and trotted to a Land Rover Discovery parked outside. I followed, squinting and light-headed from the sun reflected off the car's polished surfaces. The vehicle, along with Ahmed, were compliments of Eni S.P.A., the Italian multinational oil conglomerate.

At the car, I was pleased to see Eni had included some special equipment I had ordered for this treasure hunting expedition. Ahmed was about to toss my carry-on through the back hatch but I stopped him. He watched me zip the bag open, dig around a bit to finally pull out a folded map. I closed up the bag. Ahmed eyed me skeptically over his mirror sunglasses. I nodded to him that I had what I wanted. He slammed the hatch closed.

“How long do you think it'll take us to get where we're going?”

No answer. Ahmed's English, I determined, was extremely limited. As Arabic is not yet in my language arsenal, though Clara said I likely could pick it up easily, we had to get by with a stew of Italian, a little Greek and exaggerated gesticulations that would have done panto actors proud.

The outside temperature had to be in the high 90s with the humidity at the opposite end of the scale. The Land Rover was fully appointed and connected to the outside world by satellite, meaning the ride would be comfortable and the chances of getting stranded in the Libyan wilderness nil. When climbing aboard, I had seen the SUV also came well-stocked with water, snacks and a promising looking beer

cooler. Ahmed punched up the A/C and I reclined the seat back, looking forward to sleeping off my drugged up muddle in cool comfort on the drive ahead.

Ahmed, I had been assured, was a professional driver for Eni who by local standards drove safely. There was a cap with the Eni logo depicting the company's six-legged, fire-breathing dog embroidered on the front next to the seat. Seeing my driver had no interest in it, I put the cap on and pulled the bill down over my aching eyeballs and drifted off, until--

“Signore Blake! *Guardi! Guardi!*”

Ahmed's voice jolted me from a confused dream about some menacing animal loping through the landscape. With my eyes still closed I reached for the button controlling the seat back. Not until I was sitting upright again did I crack my eyelids open, the bill of the dragon-dog cap still shading them from obtrusive sunlight.

“*Che cosa? Che cos'è, Ahmed?*”

My driver had stopped the car. He left the engine to idle while pointing out the right-hand corner of the windshield. I made out the ruins of an ancient temple set upon a slight rise encircled by evergreen trees. Still in a half daze, I unfolded the map on my lap. Labraq Airport was circled in green toward the upper right corner. Although the airport and its town are probably less than 10 miles from the Mediterranean coast as the crow—or buzzard—flies, the roads take a more roundabout route. Using a shaky finger, I followed the highway west out of town because I vaguely remembered we were looking to avoid main roads and anyone who might question my being there.

I looked up at the temple, then down again at the map. This had to be the Temple of Zeus. This also meant we had not come all that far from the airport and I had not slept long enough to recover from my medicated flight.

The map showed Abraaq Road running east-west from the airstrip. Not far to the west I brought my finger to the town of Shahat. Ahmed had turned off the highway there to take the narrow road going north through Shahat and up to the site of the temple. Because this once had been a major tourist attraction, the road leading to it was paved, although potholed and neglected over the years.

This was my first time to the ruin, which is larger than the Parthenon in Athens. The presence of the temple gave testament to a history reaching back farther than Muslim or Roman invaders to when the ancient Greeks settled and farmed the North African coast. Under other circumstances I would have liked nothing better than to get out of the car, allow myself to be transported to another time, and take selfies with the temple as backdrop to prove ‘I, too, was here’. But this was no time to play tourist. I was all too aware from CIA Country Reports of ISIS and other radical groups having apparent historiphobia operating in the region. The Temple of Zeus would make a mouth-watering target for jihadists looking to dynamite their way into the Western news cycle.

I tried explaining to Ahmed what a bad idea it would be for us to stick around and be part of some zealot’s plans for racking up points towards Paradise. Blowing out his cheeks, he muttered, “*Come dici,*” so I think he got my gist. Too late. A bearded man had emerged from the trees behind and to our left. By the time I

noticed him, he was a stride or two from Ahmed's window. As my driver lowered his window, the stranger thrust the barrel of a light machine gun into the vehicle.

Remarkably, Ahmed was quite cool despite being inches from fellating this guy's weapon. Some short exchanges in Arabic followed. Then they got longer and the man withdrew his stick. Ahmed took a pack of Alfa's from his shirt pocket and offered one to his new friend, along with a light. The man took a deep drag and passed the *fumo* back to Ahmed, who also took a long draw. After a few more passes back and forth, the armed man motioned with his weapon for us to move along. Ahmed handed the cigarette pack out the window before closing it. Shifting into Drive, he explained to me the gentleman we encountered was akin to a park ranger.

"*Stai scherzando!* You're joking," I said. He laughed and dug out another pack of Alfa's from the armrest storage compartment. He held the lid open long enough for me to spot the handgun laying inside. A lot of good that would have done.

After bringing my heart rate back under control, I refolded the map, rolled my shoulders to loosen up, pulled down the cap visor again, and managed to fall back asleep. We were hours away yet from my destination, some of this bouncing on dirt roads and some rolling on the all-too-visible coast highway. Assuming no more untoward encounters on the way, we should reach the Haua Fteah Cave well after night fall.

I dreamed I was jostling along on the back of a donkey over the coastal desert terrain. For some reason, it seemed all too familiar.