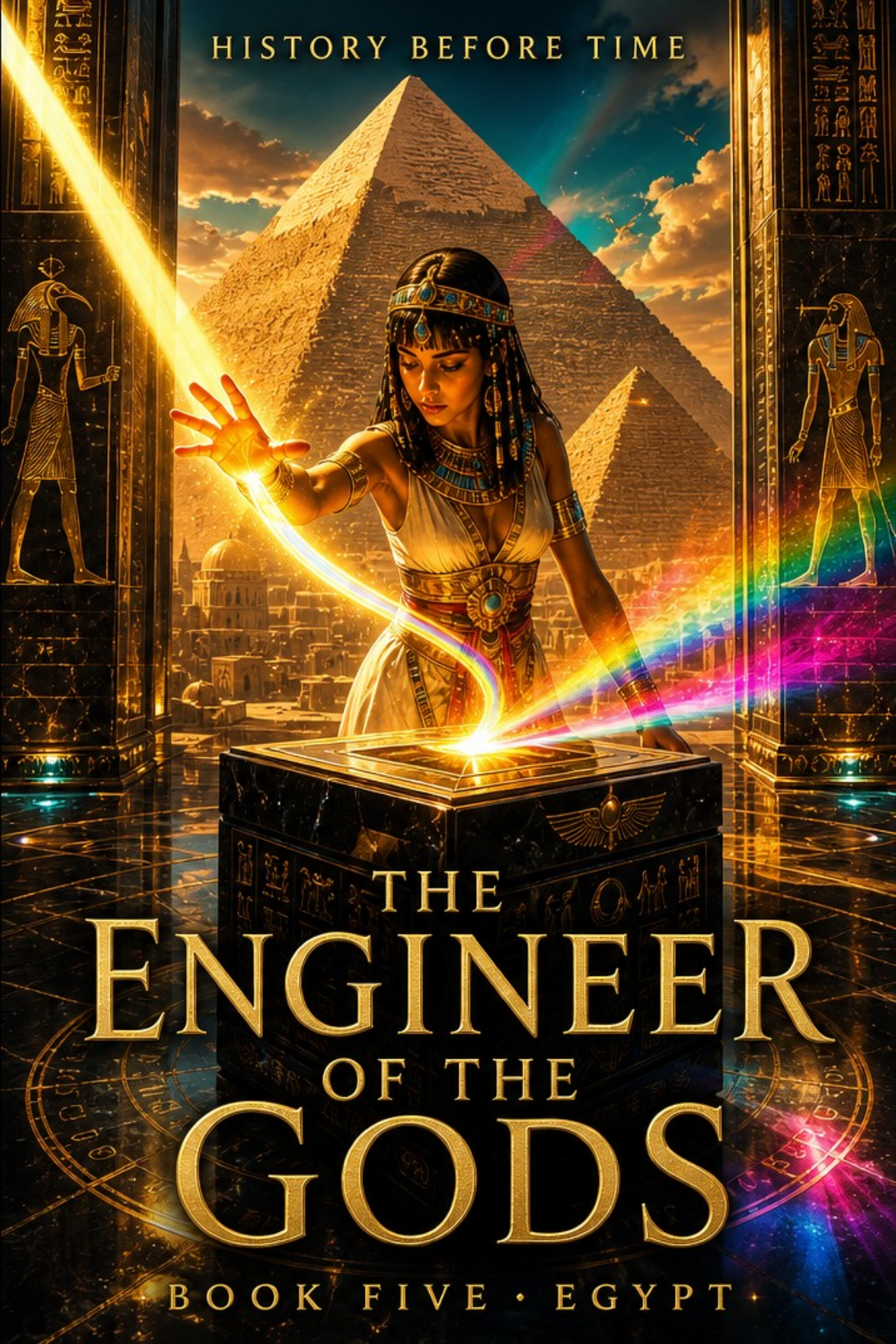
HISTORY BEFORE TIME
THE ENGINEER OF THE GODS
BOOK FIVE • EGYPT

Dedication

For Lisel.

The whole of this library — every book, every series, and the Jakobus Thread that runs through the heart of it — is hers. Each page that follows may carry another name; all of them together carry only one. She is the floor the entire house stands on.

Sawubona.

For Morgan, my youngest —

the light of this house, who carries a hundred years and three countries in her face and somehow turns all of it into brightness.

The old builders bent stone to the sun. You were the one who taught me a person can bend the light themselves.

And for the man at the controls of the gunship —

the one who came when the call finally came, twenty years after the debt was made, and asked no questions, and was simply *there* in the sky when there was no other thing on God's earth that would do.

I will not pretend it was clean. You sold the most terrible thing a man can sell, and so did the others like you, and there are ledgers on you that will never balance, and you knew it, and you flew anyway.

But there are nights a life comes down to a single hard fact: that the only thing between someone you love and a much worse death is a man with a gun who owes you, and remembers, and comes.

You were that man. You and every one of you — the pilots, the gunners, the ones who turned up in the bad places with the loud machines when the soft words had run out — whose violence, just that once, just in time, was a mercy.

I have spent these books arguing that the open hand beats the fist. I believe it. I will die believing it.

But I know who held the line while the hand learned to open. It was you. The fist. The one I needed.

Thank you for the gun. I'm sorry it had to be the answer. Rus sag, manne. Julle het gekom.

Foreword

by Carter Howard †

When I broke through into that chamber and they asked me what I could see, I said the only honest thing, which was: *wonderful things*. I have thought about that sentence for the rest of my life, because it was both the truest and the most inadequate thing a man ever said. I had spent years in the dust looking for a door, and when I found it, the wonder undid my vocabulary. I, who had catalogued ten thousand objects with a clerk's cold precision, could manage only *wonderful things*. The marvel takes your words away. That is how you know it is real.

This book gave me that feeling back, at the very end of my life, and I had not expected to feel it again on this side of the earth.

Because here is what they never let me say, in my time, in my position, funded by the men who funded me: that the hands which made the things I spent my life uncovering were *better than mine*. Not richer. Not luckier. *Better* — at the working of stone, at the bending of the year to the calendar, at the moving of a weight no modern crew could move without shame, at the placing of a shaft so that one dawn a year the sun would walk down it to touch a god's face in the dark. I lifted their treasures into the light and I got the knighthood and the headlines, and they, the actual engineers, the actual geniuses, were spoken of, when they were spoken of at all, as a mystery — as if a people clever enough to build the thing were not clever enough to have built it. The condescension of my own age toward the makers I served is the one

thing about my career I am glad not to have to defend to the author of this book, because he would see straight through it, the way his quiet hero sees through everything.

For there is a hero in here who reads a made thing the way I wish I had been taught to read one — not as loot, not as mystery, but as *engineering,* the work of a mind he respects as an equal across five thousand years. Watching him stand in the works of the old Egyptians and treat their builders as colleagues rather than riddles, I felt a thing close to shame and a thing close to release. This is how it should have been done. This is how I should have stood in that chamber: not as a discoverer, but as a *guest,* late by millennia, in the workshop of better men.

The author has done his homework, which I, of all people, am entitled to demand. The tolerances are real. The acoustics are real. The astronomy is real. He shows you the hard physical evidence first and lets the wonder land second, so that you cannot wave it away as romance, because he has already handed you the measurements. It is the honest way, and it is the way I tried to work on my good days and failed to defend on my bad ones.

Go in carefully. You are entering a tomb, in a sense — these pages are full of the dead, and they were cleverer than us, and they left their cleverness in stone precisely so that some patient soul, an age later, would stoop and read it and finally say it out loud.

I spent my life opening their doors and mislabelling what was behind them. This book opens the same doors and, at last, reads the room right.

I can see *wonderful things.* So will you. And this time, someone has found the words.

— Carter Howard

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† An anagram of the man who opened the most famous door in

Egypt, set down in homage and with a colleague's affection. The author of this book wrote these words; the borrowed name is a salute across the sand, not a claim.

A Stranger in Strange Lands

> *Grok means to understand so thoroughly that the observer becomes a part of the observed — to merge, blend … lose identity in group experience. … You cannot hate anything unless you grok it, understand it so thoroughly that you merge with it and it merges with you — then you can hate it. … But this implies that you love it, too, and cherish it, and would not have it otherwise.*
>
> — Robert A. Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961)

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grok /ɡrɑk/ *v.* (Martian; coined by Heinlein) — to take a thing in so completely that knower and known are no longer two; literally, *to drink*. It has no true English equal. The nearest word in any tongue may be Zulu: ***Sawubona*** — *I see you.* Both name the same act — to receive another whole — and the rare kind of person who lives by it: at home with everyone, and a stranger in every land.

A Note on the Words

For readers who did not grow up at the bottom of Africa.

The people in this book speak the way people actually speak in southern Africa — which is to say, in three or four languages at once, often inside a single sentence, without stopping to translate themselves. That's not decoration; it's the truth of the place. But a few words and turns of phrase recur often enough, and matter enough, that a short key may help — especially around Jakobus Swart, who has the genuinely infuriating habit of using one particular word as though everyone were issued the same dictionary at birth.

The one that isn't African at all

grok *(verb)* — to understand something so completely, from the inside, that you stop being able to hold yourself separate from it; to know a thing by *becoming* it. The word is **not** Afrikaans and not African — it was coined by the American science-fiction writer **Robert A. Heinlein** in his 1961 novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, where it is a Martian word meaning, roughly, "to drink" and, by extension, to take a thing wholly into yourself. Jakobus reads one book to pieces and it shows; he drops *grok* into conversation like loose change and never once explains it, which tells you something about him before he tells you anything himself. *(To grok the man is, eventually, the whole point.)*

Afrikaans

- **ag** — an all-purpose sigh of a word; “oh,” “well,” “ach.” *Ag, man. Ag, shame.*
- **bakkie** — a pickup truck / light utility vehicle (a “ute,” a “truck”).
- **ja** — yes. **ja-nee** (lit. “yes-no”) — an emphatic agreement, “yes indeed,” “for sure.”
- **jirre** / **jislaaik** — mild exclamations, “jeez,” “blimey.”
- **koeksister** — a plaited, deep-fried, syrup-soaked pastry. Sticky. Wonderful.
- **kopje** / **koppie** — a small steep hill standing alone on the plains.
- **meisie** — girl, lass. **sussie** — little sister (an affectionate term, not necessarily blood).
- **oom** / **tannie** — uncle / aunty; used respectfully for any older man or woman.
- **putu** (also *pap*) — stiff maize-meal porridge, a staple; eaten with the hands when dry.
- **Totsiens** — goodbye (lit. “till we see [each other again]”).
- **veld** — open uncultivated country; grassland, bush. *Highveld* = the high interior plateau.
- **voetsek** — a blunt “go away / clear off / get lost” (originally said to dogs; sharpen accordingly).

South African English (words that mean something different here)

- **robot** — a traffic light. (Not a machine. “Turn left at the robot.”)
- **lift** — an elevator.
- **just now** — soon, but not immediately; “in a little while.” (**now-now** = sooner than *just now*.)
- **shame** — an expression of sympathy or fondness, not embarrassment. *Ag, shame* = “aw, bless.”
- **café** (often *kaffie*) — a small corner shop, not a coffee house.
- **takkies** — sneakers / trainers. **costume** — a swimsuit.

- **is it?** — a conversational acknowledgement, like “oh really?” — not always a question.

isiZulu (the greeting that runs through all the books)

- **Sawubona** — “I see you.” A greeting, but a deep one: *I see you, you are real to me.*
- **Sikhona** — the reply: “I am here.” *Because you see me, I am here.* The two together are the spine of more than one friendship in these pages.
- **Ubuntu** / ***umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*** — “a person is a person through other people.” The proverb Jakobus carries from his ouma, said plainly, never as a lecture.
- **Hamba kahle** — “go well” (a farewell). **Baba** — father; a term of deep respect for an elder.

Nothing here needs to be memorised. The words will carry you on their own, the way they carry the people who speak them. This is only here for the curious — and for anyone who, like a certain engineer in this book, refuses to let a word go by unexplained.

Chapter 1 — The Girl Who Did Not Know

The first thing she ever loved was light, and she thought, the way small children think, that the light loved her back.

She was small — small enough that the men working the dig still called her *the little one* in three languages and meant it kindly — and she had been left, as she was always left, in the long shade of the supply tent while the grown people argued over the thing they had pulled out of the sand. She did not mind. The arguing was boring. The light was not.

It was the hour the photographers called magic, when the sun goes low and red over the Western Desert and everything stands up out of itself, every pebble throwing a shadow longer than a man, the whole plateau turned to hammered copper and blood and gold. She sat with her back against a crate and watched a single shaft of it come through the gap in the tent flap and lie across the sand like something spilled. The dust hung in it, each mote turning slowly, each one its own small fire. She liked the dust best when it caught the light like that. It made the air look alive, made it look like the inside of a thing instead of the outside of nothing.

And — because she was alone, and because no one had ever told her she couldn't — she reached one brown finger into the beam and pretended.

She pretended she could move it. Not her hand. The light.

She crooked her finger the way you'd curl a strand of hair, and she made believe the beam came, warm and willing, bending out of its straight line to wind once around her knuckle and pool in her palm. The dust wheeled where she stirred it, swirling up off her fingertip, so that for a moment the whole shaft of red-gold evening did seem to lean toward her hand like a flower toward a window. She laughed — a four-year-old's laugh, delighted and entirely solemn about the game — and she held her cupped hand up and pretended a small sun turned in it, throwing its turning light up under her chin and into her enormous dark serious eyes, before she opened her fingers and gave it back to being only light.

The dust settled. The beam lay straight again across the sand, the way it had never stopped lying. She thought that was funny too — that it wanted to be straight so badly, when bending was so much nicer to imagine.

She did it again, slower, because she liked the part where she could almost believe it. There was always a moment, in the game, where the light seemed to resist, the way the cat resisted being picked up, taut and unwilling, and then to soften and come — and she never tired of that imagined softening, the small surrender of a thing that had no reason to obey her and did anyway, in the place behind her eyes where she kept it.

"Layla."

She looked up. It was the kind Frenchman, Dr. Aubert, the one who saved her the apricots, and he was standing in the tent mouth with a strange flat look on his face — the look adults got sometimes when she had done a thing, though she never knew which thing, and the not-knowing was the whole texture of her childhood. His shadow fell across her crate, long and thin in the magic light, and she watched it instead of him, because shadows were just light with the bending taken out. She smiled at him, because she liked him.

"I was playing with the light," she said helpfully, in French, because he was French.

"Yes," he said. His voice had gone very careful, set down softly, the way you set down something you were afraid to drop. Behind him, far off, the arguing had stopped. The whole desert seemed to have stopped, holding the kind of silence that is not empty but full, the silence of a held breath. "Yes, *ma puce*. I saw."

She did not understand why his hand shook when he held out the apricot. She took it and ate it and it was good, sweet and a little dusty, the way everything at the dig was a little dusty, and she did not give the light another thought, because there was always more light tomorrow and there was an apricot now.

The sun went down. The desert went blue and then black and then enormous with stars, and somewhere under all that sand a thing that had waited longer than there had been a word for *waiting* registered, for the first time in eleven thousand years, that the one it was built to answer had finally been born. It did not wake. It was not time. But it *knew*, the way a tuning fork knows the note that will one day be struck, and across a continent and an ocean and a span of years, other tuned things stirred half a degree toward warmth and went still again.

She did not know that.

She was four, and she had an apricot, and she fell asleep against the crate before the lamps were lit. Dr. Aubert sat up the whole night with his back against the same crate and a satellite phone in his lap. He turned it over in his hands many times. He keyed in the number twice and erased it twice. He was a careful man, and being careful, he ran it all the way to its end before he did anything — and what he saw at the end of it stopped his thumb cold.

He had seen what he had seen. There was no unseeing it. And he understood, with the particular clarity that comes at three in the morning in a desert, that the instant he spoke into that phone, the child eating apricots in the dark would stop being a child to the men

on the other end of it, and start being the most important object on the surface of the earth.

He could not do it. He put the phone away. He told himself it was kindness and knew, in the same breath, that it was also cowardice, and that the two were sometimes the same animal wearing different coats.

Twenty-two years later, a man who was not careful at all said the word *aliens* on the most popular podcast in the world, and the whole thing came apart.

His name was Ben van Kerk, and he was, depending on who you asked, the most dangerous crank in modern archaeology or the only honest engineer left alive. But at the specific moment the trouble started he was simply sitting in a leather chair in Austin, Texas, sweating under a light he could not bend, watching a famous man lean forward across a wooden table.

The studio was smaller than people expected. That was the first thing everyone said when they came on, and Ben had said it too, and the famous man had laughed the laugh that meant *I have heard that exactly nine thousand times*. It was a converted garage with the soul sucked out of it and replaced with acoustic foam and money — black panelled walls eating the sound, a forest of microphones on articulated arms, two coffees going cold because nobody on a four-hour podcast ever drank the coffee, and somewhere off in the dark a producer whose entire job was to do nothing visible. The lights were the brutal part. They came down out of the ceiling in a hard white wash that found every bead of sweat on a man's forehead and held it up for the camera like evidence.

Ben hated the lights. Not because of how he looked — he had given up on how he looked somewhere over the Atlantic — but because they were *flat*. There was no shape to them, no angle, nothing for the eye to catch on, and a man who had spent ten years learning to read stone by the way raking light fell across it found a room with no shadows faintly

obscene, the way a doctor might find a room with no clocks. You could not measure anything in light like that. It told you nothing was wrong when everything might be.

"Okay," said the famous man, and the room sharpened around him the way rooms did. He had that. Whatever it was, he had it, and forty million people a month tuned in to be in the same room as it. "So walk me through it. The boxes. Start with the boxes."

Ben van Kerk grinned, because the boxes were his favourite.

He had no idea — none, the magnificent idiot — what saying yes was about to cost him. He could not have known that somewhere east of where he sat, across an ocean and a desert, a man with more money than several countries had a clip of this conversation cued up and waiting. He could not have known that the careful Frenchman's silence was about to end, twenty-two years late, because being careful only buys you time, and time runs out. He knew none of it. He only knew that the boxes were beautiful and impossible and that nobody — *nobody* — would look at them straight.

"Right," he said. "So. There's a place called the Serapeum."

"Sara—"

"Serapeum. Saqqara, south of Cairo. You go down into the rock — tunnel system, cut into bedrock — and lining the walls, these boxes." He held up his hands, framing the air, and the gesture was unconscious and exact, the gesture of a man who had stood in front of the real thing and could not stop seeing it. "Granite. Some of them diorite, harder. Each one out of a *single* block. Lid of matching stone on top. And we're not talking jewellery box, we're talking — seventy tonnes. Eighty. Bigger than the car you drove here in. Sixty-odd of them, lowered into niches cut to fit, down a corridor in the absolute dark."

"Okay," said the famous man, and he was leaning in now, the lean that the regulars knew meant the next two hours were spoken for. "And the official line is—"

"Sarcophagi. Coffins. For bulls." Ben let that sit. He was good at letting things sit; it was the only theatrical instinct he had and he leaned on it. "Sacred bulls. The Apis cult. And — listen. This is where everybody screws it up." He pointed a blunt finger at the table, at the famous man, at the unseen forty million. "The people who put the bulls in those boxes ran a civilisation three thousand years. You don't do that stupid. So when I say they didn't cut the boxes, I'm not saying they couldn't tie their shoes. Different claim. I'm making a tolerance claim. Keep the two separate."

"So what's the argument?"

Ben reached down beside his chair. The producer in the dark twitched, because guests were not supposed to bring things, but Ben had brought a thing, a small thing, and he set it on the wooden table between them with a soft heavy click that the microphones loved.

It was a feeler gauge. A fan of thin steel blades on a pivot, the kind a mechanic carries, each leaf etched with a number too small to read on camera. Worn. Used. It looked absurd on the table in the temple of the podcast, this little workshop tool under the hard white light, and that was exactly why Ben had brought it.

"This," said Ben, "is the argument."

"That's a—"

"Feeler gauge. Set the gap on a spark plug with it. Machinist's tool. Thinnest blade's four-thousandths of an inch — about the width of a hair. Thin one." He flicked the relevant leaf out with his thumbnail; it caught the flat light and threw it back, a sliver of mirror. "So. I take this to Saqqara. Precision straightedge — granite, certified flat, the kind you'd find in a metrology lab — and I lay it against the *inside* wall of one of those boxes. Eighty-tonne box. Cut, supposedly, by men with copper chisels and stone hammers and infinite patience." He paused. The room held. "And I try to slide this under. The hair-width blade. Looking for the gap. The bump, the wave, the place where the hand got tired, the place where the stone won."

"And?"

"Doesn't go in." Ben said it very quietly, which on that show, in that light, was the loudest a man could be. "Anywhere. Surface is flat to under four-thousandths across a face longer than I am tall. Inside corners — where two walls meet — squared so sharp you can't get a fingernail in the join. I've had shops in three countries quote me on reproducing one. Modern shops. Diamond tooling, CNC, climate-controlled rooms so the granite doesn't move a thousandth as the day warms up." He turned the feeler gauge over once, set it down. "You know what they say? Every one, once they stop laughing? They say *we can't*. Not *that's expensive*. Not *that's hard*. *We cannot hold that tolerance in that material at that scale*. And these are men who make jet engine parts."

The famous man sat back. Off in the dark, the producer had gone very still. This was the moment — Ben had felt it before, the tilt, the place in the conversation where the room either decided he was a clown or decided, against its own better judgment, to be afraid with him — and he felt it tilt now, and the grin came back, because god help him he loved this, he loved the falling silence, he had nothing else left that the falling silence couldn't fill.

"So who made them?" the famous man asked.

And Ben van Kerk, who should have said *I don't know, and the honest answer is nobody knows, and isn't that the most exciting sentence in the world* — Ben van Kerk, who was tired and four whiskies into a long flight and right, so completely right, and so completely sick of being right alone in a room full of people who would not pick up the tool and *check* —

Ben van Kerk leaned forward into the flat white light, and he grinned his un-charming grin, and he said the word.

He said it like a joke. He even did the air-quotes. But the clip would not keep the air-quotes. The clip — forty seconds of it, the feeler gauge and the impossible corner and the word — would shear off from the

four hours around it like a flake off a struck core, and it would go out into the world stripped of every careful thing he had said before it, and within a week he would be a meme and a punchline and a prophet and a profile in three magazines, and the academy that had merely disliked him would come to *hate* him with the specific hatred reserved for the man who makes the laymen ask questions you can't answer in a faculty meeting.

He did not know any of that yet. He sat back, pleased with himself, and reached for the cold coffee at last, and did not drink it, and across the world the clip began, silently, to load.

It was raining in Cairo, which it almost never did, a thin grey spit out of an iron sky, and in a back room above a shop in the Khan el-Khalili that smelled of brass-dust and lamp-oil, three people who were not from Cairo sat around a phone and watched the man say *aliens*, and one of them — an old woman with a still face and a folder of survey charts she had carried across an ocean — pressed the screen dark with one finger and let out a long breath through her nose.

"He's an idiot," said the youngest of them.

"He's an idiot who can measure," said the old woman. She did not look up from the dark phone. On the table in front of her was a single chart, weighted at the corners with copper coffee cups, and across it ran a line — a bearing, drawn in red, a direction and a depth that had been read off the floor of the Indian Ocean by a woman she had never met and handed forward without its outcome attached. The line came out of the sea east of India and crossed the whole blue width of the chart and ran ashore right here, at the drowned mouth of a river, north of where they sat. They had carried it three thousand miles. They had been in Cairo eleven days. And they were stuck, because the line pointed down into the dark of a thing none of them could read, and the only man alive who might read it had just told forty million people it was built by Martians.

"We need him," the old woman said, and the way she said it made it sound like a diagnosis of something terminal.

"We need what he does. Not him." The youngest cut in too fast, the way you defend a thing when you suspect you'll be overruled. "Different thing. Minute he's in this room he owns half of it. You've seen the clip. He cannot keep his mouth shut for money."

"We need *something*," said the third of them, the one who had been quiet, looking out the streaked window at the lanterns coming on gold in the rain below, at the souk waking into its evening, the copper light and the spice-smoke and the river of people. "He reads the stone. Fine. But the bearing doesn't answer to a feeler gauge. We read the chamber off India because it *let* itself be read. Something has to answer it here. We don't have it. Never have."

"That's your reading," the youngest said. "The depth on that line is soft. You know it's soft. Eleven days, on a number a woman called up off a seabed with her hand."

The old woman looked at the red line on the chart for a long moment, and did not rise to it.

"No," she said. "We don't have it. Not yet."

Below them, in the gold and the rain, a young woman she had never seen was walking home through the Khan, late from work, with stone-dust under her fingernails and no idea on earth that anyone, anywhere, had just said her city's name in a sentence that would come for her.

Chapter 2 — A Reasonable Man

The copper-beaters of the Khan el-Khalili started before the muezzin, which Layla had always thought said something honest about Cairo: that the city would rather make a thing than pray about it, and did both anyway, all day, at the top of its lungs.

She came down the Sikka el-Badistan with two restored brass trays balanced against her hip and the morning already going gold between the buildings, the light coming sideways through the dust and the hanging lanterns and the steam off Amm Hassan's tea so that the whole lane looked, for a moment, like the inside of something on fire in a good way. A boy went past with a tower of bread on his head, walking the way they all walked, hips loose and chin level, the whole architecture of him organised around the thing he carried. A cat watched her from a sack of dried hibiscus the colour of a wound. Somebody's radio was losing an argument with somebody else's radio — Umm Kulthum against a football phone-in, the great dead voice and the shouting one, neither giving ground. A perfume-seller flicked attar onto the wrist of a tourist who had not asked for it and would now feel obliged. The smell of it chased her down the lane: amber, then frying onion, then hot brass, then the specific ammoniac sweetness of a donkey somewhere close.

She loved it the way you love a thing you have never once had to wonder whether you belonged to.

"You're late," said Tarek, not looking up from the workbench, which was rich, coming from a nineteen-year-old who measured time in cigarettes.

"I'm not late. The Frenchwoman wanted provenance." She set the trays down on the felt, edge-on, the way you set down work you respect. "Provenance. On a tray her grandfather bought in this lane in nineteen-seventy-something. I told her — a man hit it with a hammer until it was beautiful. She wrote it down. In a little book. With a pencil she probably thinks is Old Kingdom."

Tarek snorted, and a curl of brass jumped off his graver. Their uncle's shop was eight feet wide and went back into the dark like a throat, and the front of it was hung with the work of four generations — lanterns, trays, ewers, the big repoussé chargers nobody could afford and everybody photographed — and the back of it, where the light didn't reach, was where the real work happened, which was *fixing*. Layla fixed. She had the hands for it, everyone said so, the patience and the eye; she could take a dented hundred-year-old ewer, all bruised in its belly where some decade had dropped it, and tease the metal back to its line from the inside with a stake and a soft hammer until you couldn't find the wound with a fingernail. She was good. She knew she was good. It was the one thing she was sure of, and it was a small thing, and she had made her peace with small. A girl from the Khan who fixed metal. There were a thousand of her, and nobody looked for you in a crowd of a thousand.

What she had not made her peace with — what she had not told anyone, not Tarek, not her mother, not the imam, not the doctor she had almost, *almost* gone to see, had sat in the waiting room of with her hands between her knees before deciding her blood pressure was a stranger's business — was the museum.

It had been a Tuesday. Her day off. She had gone to the Egyptian Museum the way she sometimes did, paying the Egyptian price at the little window and ignoring the man who tried to sell her a guide she didn't need, because looking at worked things was the closest she

had to a vice. She had wandered up past the school groups, past the tour-flags held aloft like little nations, into the quieter halls where the dust came down in a slow gold cylinder through a high window and the guards dozed standing up, and she had stopped in front of a fragment.

It was nothing. That was the thing she kept coming back to. It was a broken corner of something — basalt, the label said, in three languages all slightly disagreeing with each other, *statue base, provenance unknown, Old Kingdom (?)* — a chunk of black stone no bigger than a loaf, sitting on a perspex riser behind glass that hadn't been cleaned since Mubarak, with a tourist's greasy ghost of a forehead on it at child height. And she had looked at it, at the *worked face* of it, the flat of it, the way the corner went down into an edge so clean it looked wet, and some part of her that fixed metal for a living had leaned in close with a craftsman's plain admiration and thought: *how.*

How did you do that. She knew hard. She knew the difference between the give of copper and the sullen refusal of bronze, knew how a metal fought you and where it would crack if you bullied it. She had no instrument for stone, but she had eyes, and her eyes told her the truth her hands would have confirmed: that this was the hardest, meanest stone there was, and someone had cut a corner in it like the inside of a folded sheet of paper, and had done it without leaving a single tremor, a single hesitation, a single human flinch in the line. And she had —

She had put her hand up. Near the glass. Not touching. She wasn't a child.

And the stone had *answered.*

She didn't have a better word. She had turned it over a hundred nights since, lying awake while Tarek snored through the wall and a cat fought a war in the alley below, and she had no better word than that one. Not a sound, exactly, though there had been something like a sound, a single low note that she felt in the long bones of her arm before she heard it, if she heard it at all — the way you feel the oud's bottom string in your sternum before your ear admits it. Not heat, exactly, though the stone — *cold* stone, five-thousand-year-old stone,

stone that had no business being anything but cold under museum air-conditioning gone tired in its old age — had gone warm. A warmth that reached, that came *toward* her hand and not the other way around. And under both of those, under the note and the warmth, the thing she could not say to a doctor without becoming, in the doctor's eyes, a different and smaller kind of person: the stone had *known she was there*. It had been waiting. It had been waiting a very long time, longer than the building, longer than the language on the label, and it was *glad*.

She had snatched her hand back so fast she'd knocked her elbow on the case, hard enough to bruise, and an attendant had glanced over with the slow suspicion of a man paid to glance, and she had walked out into the white afternoon with her heart going like Tarek's hammer and the absolute certainty, which she still held, which she would hold to her grave, of two contradictory things at once: that she had imagined it, and that it was the truest thing that had ever happened to her.

She had not gone back. She was afraid to go back. She was more afraid, lately, of the days she *wanted* to — and there were more of those, now, not fewer.

"Layla." Tarek flicked a curl of brass at her; it stuck in her hair and she left it there. "You're doing the face."

"What face."

"The museum face." He set the graver down and looked at her properly, which he almost never did, which was worse. He didn't know about the stone. He thought she had a boy. "Mama says — if you're going to be in love, at least pick someone who comes to dinner. She made the okra. *For him,* Layla. She set a place."

"Tell Mama I'm in love with a tray," she said, and picked up the planishing hammer, the small one, the one with the handle worn to the shape of her own grip across years she could measure in the wood, and bent to the work, and let the small sure thing fill up the place where the large frightening one lived, the way she did every day now, and was getting, she told herself, quite good at.

Four thousand miles away and eleven hours earlier, Ben van Kerk had been the most popular man on Earth for about ninety seconds, and was now, by his own estimate, the most hated.

The clip had thirty-one million views. He knew this because his phone had not stopped buzzing on the nightstand of the Austin hotel since six in the morning, walking itself slowly toward the edge of the lacquered fake wood with each new notification like something trying to commit suicide, and he had lain in the dark in a bed the size of a small country and watched it do it and not picked it up, because he knew exactly what was in it. Half the messages would be from people who thought he was a prophet. Half would be from people who wanted him dead. And one — there was always one — would be from someone with a real measurement, a real anomaly, a real photograph of a real impossible thing, sent by a real frightened amateur in a real town who had nobody else on Earth to tell because everybody else on Earth had told them to stop being stupid, and that was the one he could never quite stop reading for, and the reason he could never quite throw the phone in the pool.

He picked it up. He scrolled, thumb working, eyes flat. *Grifter. Genius. Aliens?? bro. You changed my life. You should be in prison. Source on the 0.0002"?? Followed by you don't deserve your audience. Followed by a verse from Daniel. Followed by an offer to manage his crypto.* And then, from a producer's verified account, a clip of himself, frozen mid-grin in that flattering podcast amber, with a chyron somebody had added in a font designed to be screenshotted: **ENGINEER: PYRAMIDS BUILT BY ALIENS.**

"I didn't say aliens," Ben said, to the empty room, in Afrikaans, with great and ancient tiredness. "*Jirre.* Not once."

He had not said aliens. He could replay it to the syllable, because he replayed it all night, the tape running behind his eyes in the dark: he had said — careful, leaning on the word *parsimonious* the way you lean on a railing over a drop — that the precision artefacts displayed man-

ufacturing tolerances inconsistent with the toolkit attributed to their supposed makers. That the flatness was real. That you could measure it, that he *had* measured it, on his knees in the dark with a feeler gauge and a granite straightedge he'd carried through three airports. That the most parsimonious explanation, the one an engineer reaches for before he reaches for anything exotic, anything with a saucer in it, was that the dynastic Egyptians had *inherited* them. Found them. Revered them. Built around them with a glory of their own. He had been careful. He was always careful; carefulness was the only religion he had left, the one he'd kept when they took the rest.

And then the host, grinning, leaning in over the foam-tipped microphone with twelve million people listening, had said the word *aliens?* with a little lift at the end of it, just floating it out there over the table, the way they always did — and Ben, tired, lit hot from the overhead, three hours and thirty-one-million-views deep into the worst kind of fame, had laughed, the easy laugh, the green-room laugh, and said *I'm not going to tell you it wasn't aliens.*

Which was a joke. Which was *obviously* a joke. Which was now a chyron, forever, in a flattering amber light.

That was the trap of being the only careful man at the carnival: they wanted the chyron, the lift at the end, the grin. And the worst part, the part that kept him up worse than any professor's contempt, worse than the email from his old department head with no words in it, only an unsubscribe — the worst part was that some nights he *gave it to them.* Because the grin was easier than the gauge. Because the crowd that loved the grin loved it loud and immediate and warm, twelve million strong, and the truth loved him back the way granite loves you, which is not at all, which is to say it just sits there being true and lets you freeze. He was so tired of being right in an empty room.

He got up. The carpet was the temperature of nothing. He stood at the window with the Texas dawn coming up brown and enormous over a tangle of interchanges, headlights threading through it in two patient rivers, and he made himself say the true thing, the engineer's

thing, the only thing that had ever once steadied him:

The boxes were still real.

Whatever he had or hadn't said. However many idiots had made him a meme with a font. The granite was still cut to four ten-thousandths of an inch in a tunnel under the Egyptian desert, the interior of it flatter than the room he was standing in, by s*omebody,* with s*omething,* and no chyron in the world could un-cut it, no professor un-flatten it, no view-count touch it. The truth didn't need him to defend it. It just sat there in the dark being true, and waited, and that — he pressed his forehead to the cold glass — *that* was the whole difference between a fact and a faith. A faith needs you. A fact just needs a straightedge.

He should go and stand on it again. That was the thought, the one that arrived every single time the noise got bad, arriving now like a hand on the back of his neck: *go and put your hand on the stone.* Cairo. The dark under the desert. The cool breathing weight of a place that had never once heard of him. It was the only thing that ever shut the phone up, in his head if not in his hand.

His phone buzzed. A different buzz — deeper, the work line, the encrypted one, three people in the world had the number and one of them was dead. He looked at it on the nightstand, vibrating itself toward the drop.

UNKNOWN, it said.

And then, before his thumb could find the red, a text came in *under* the call, riding in beneath it, and it was not a meme, and it was not a death threat, and it was not a frightened amateur with a photograph of a thing in a field.

It said: **The boxes were the easy part. There's a woman in Cairo the stone talks back to. We have a problem. — you don't know me, but you knew Aubert.**

Ben van Kerk stood very still in the brown Texas light, in a hotel room he wasn't paying for, holding a phone in each metaphorical hand — the

one that wouldn't stop screaming at thirty-one million voices, and the one that had just gone very, very quiet and named the only dead man who'd ever earned the silence. *Aubert.* Nobody knew about Aubert. Aubert was a feeler gauge in a riverbed in another country. Aubert was the reason Ben checked the lock twice.

And under that name, the other words, which he had not let himself read again and now read again: *a woman the stone talks back to.* He thought of the flat black face of a thing under glass that he had measured with his own two hands and could not explain. He thought of the word *answers,* a word he had never once let himself use about a piece of rock.

The floor of his careful life tilted very slightly, the way a deck does when something enormous turns over far below the waterline, slow and total, and you feel it in your knees before you understand it.

"*Fok,*" he said, with feeling, to nobody, to Texas, to the dead man, to the woman he had not yet met.

And answered it.

Chapter 3 — The People Who Keep Things

Cairo hit Ben the way it hits everyone the first hour off the plane, which is all at once and from every direction, a city that does not arrive at you in layers but lands on you whole — the heat, the horns, the eleven-million-deep human surf of it, the smell of diesel and jasmine and the river, the apartment blocks going up forever the colour of the dust they were made from, washing strung between them like signal flags from a fleet that had given up sailing and decided to just live here. Somewhere a muezzin started, and another answered him half a beat behind, and the two voices climbed over the traffic and braided and let go, and the whole vast machine of the place kept moving as though sound were just weather. He had been to forty countries with a feeler gauge. He had never been anywhere that made him feel so thoroughly that the planet had been here a long time before him and would be fine after.

The woman waiting at arrivals was holding a sign that said, in English, BEN VAN CRANK, and was grinning at him over the top of it.

"That's not my name," he said.

"Sign in Frankfurt said it. The hall you walked out of." She lowered the card and let her eyes do a quick inventory of him — the rumpled linen, the carry-on with the foam case inside it that he hadn't let out of his hand on the flight, the famous face that two girls near the currency

desk had already clocked and were now whispering about behind a phone. She was Cairene, fortyish, dressed for getting things done — good boots, a scarf knotted with the carelessness of someone who'd knotted it ten thousand times, a phone in each hand — and she looked at him with the unimpressed warmth of a person who has fetched many famous idiots from many airports and buried none of them, yet. "Dalia. I move things. People, crates, problems. You're a problem. Walk fast — parking here's a war crime."

He walked fast. The girls with the phone peeled off the wall to follow, and Dalia clocked them in the same breath she'd clocked everything else, and didn't slow.

"You're not the Order," he said. He'd been briefed, badly, by a man on a bad line who'd kept saying *they'll find you* as though that were reassuring.

"God, no. The Order are upstairs people — they read things, keep things, they've got a vow and a creaking chair somewhere. I'm downstairs. Downstairs is who you want when the famous man with the chyron lands and there are three sets of eyes on the concourse that aren't mine." She didn't slow down, but her chin moved a fraction, twice, the way you'd flick a fly. "Don't look. Two by the pharmacy, matching shoes — a thing tired men do when somebody buys their shoes for them. One pretending to read the *Ahram*. Upside down, bless him. Here since before your flight. Didn't follow you. Knew the flight."

"Someone sold the manifest," Ben said.

"He learns." She steered him with a hand that never quite touched him, through a fire door that should have been locked and wasn't, because she'd seen to it, into a service corridor that smelled of cleaning fluid and the deep brown of ful cooking somewhere off a kitchen, past a porter who looked at neither of them with the studied blankness of a man being paid not to, and out the back of the airport into a wall of white heat that took the breath out of Ben like a hand on the sternum — and a dented Peugeot that had been beautiful in 1974. "Get in. Mind the spring."

He got in. He minded the spring.

There was a man in the front passenger seat, and the man turned around, and Ben — who had spent ten years learning not to be surprised by anything, because being surprised was how the cranks got you, how the believers got you, how you ended up nodding along to ley lines and crystal frequencies in a hotel bar at two in the morning — was surprised.

The man wore sunglasses indoors, in a car, in a way that managed not to read as a pose but as a kind of professional courtesy, as if his eyes were a thing he was sparing you. He was an older South African; Ben heard it the instant he spoke, the same flattened vowels Ben himself reached for when he was tired or frightened, and his chest tightened in a way it hadn't since he'd left Cape Town.

"Meneer van Kerk. Jakobus. I knew your work before the podcast. The granite paper — the real one, before the Americans got hold of you." He said *the Americans* the way you'd say *the weather,* a force with no malice in it. "You measure well. Rarer than being right. Any fool can be right by accident."

"Most people lead with the podcast," Ben said.

"Most people," Jakobus agreed, "are not me." He looked at Ben for a moment over the top of the sunglasses — just a moment, the eyes a surprise of their own, pale and quick and moving, taking in the concourse behind them through the rear window, the parked cars, the matching shoes coming out of the terminal doors now and stopping, the mirrors, Ben's hands where they gripped the foam case, all of it at once and none of it rudely, the way another man might glance at a watch — and then the glasses went back up and he faced front and said, "Drive, Dalia, before the *Ahram* learns which way up his newspaper goes," and the Peugeot pulled out into the murderous river of Cairo traffic.

What happened next would have stopped Ben's heart if he'd had a second to spare for it. Dalia drove the way the city drove, which was

to say she drove into gaps that did not yet exist on the theory that they would exist by the time she got there, threading a lorry stacked with crated chickens and a microbus with its door hanging open and a donkey cart and a Mercedes with gold rims and a family of four on one motorbike, the horn not a warning but a conversation, a language of taps and leans, and the Peugeot becoming, instantly, one fish in the shoal — not fleeing the river, *joining* it, which was the only way to disappear. A black SUV tried to come after them out of the airport lane and met the river and the river did not care about the SUV's money or its eight cylinders; it closed over it like water over a stone.

"You're the fixer," Ben said, when he could.

"I keep promises. Some are old. Told someone, a long time ago and a long way south, that the road I was on ran to Egypt." A beat, the city sliding gold and grey and dust past the windows. "Didn't tell her it ran here through *you*. The road has a sense of humour."

They took him to a flat in Garden City, a high old colonial pile gone soft at the edges, the kind of building the British had thrown up to feel permanent and then left behind like everything else, shuttered against the heat, with a ceiling fan turning slow over a room full of the most interesting collection of objects Ben had seen since he'd stopped being allowed into the rooms with the interesting objects. The light came through the shutters in bars, laid itself across a marble floor and a wall of books in four alphabets, and held a haze of dust in the air so still it looked solid, a cube of suspended gold you could have cut with a wire.

The Order, it turned out, were three.

There was an Englishwoman with grey-cropped hair and a marine surveyor's tan, the brown of someone whose forearms have spent more time over water than under a roof, who introduced herself only as Sefton and clearly thought Ben was a circus act they'd been forced to hire and were now obliged to feed. There was a younger man, all

earnest and credentials, who within ninety seconds had tried to show Ben two journal papers as though Ben had not read them, had not in one case sat in a windowless review committee and been told, gently, by a man he'd respected, that the work was *interesting* but the *framing* would *end careers,* meaning Ben's. And there was, in the corner, in the good chair, an old Egyptian man with a face like a riverbed — all soft erosions and a deep current under — and a small glass of tea balanced on the arm of the chair, who said nothing at all and watched Ben the way Ben himself watched a dented ewer: as a thing that could be brought back to its true line, if you were patient, and had the eye, and were willing to be wrong about it for a while first.

"Right," said Sefton, who did not have the eye and did not intend to be patient. "Mr van Kerk. We didn't ask for you. I want that on the table before anything else goes on it. You're a liability with thirty million followers and a chyron with the word *aliens* in it — a word you say the edit chose, which is the defence of every man who's ever been edited — and your face is the last thing this operation needs walking through an airport. We had a marine surveyor and a metrologist on the long list. We got *you*." She set a flat steel case on the table between them, the latches clicking under her thumbs like a sound she'd made a thousand times. "But you can read a thing we can't, and we're stuck, and the people who are also stuck are not as nice as we are, and they have better cars. So."

She opened the case.

Inside, on grey foam, was a disc.

Ben stopped being a liability with thirty million followers. He stopped being anything but a pair of eyes.

It was perhaps fifteen centimetres across, dark, and at first he took it for stone, then for ceramic, and reached for the gauge in his head — the reflexive measuring, the only prayer he knew — and then Sefton, watching his face the way the others were all suddenly watching his face, tilted the case a few degrees so the bars of fan-light moved across it, and he saw the *depth* of it, the way the light went *into* the

surface and turned and came back changed, and he knew it was not stone, and his mouth went dry, the saliva simply gone, because he had spent ten years being told in rooms exactly like this one that the thing he was now looking at did not, could not, must not exist.

It was gold.

It was gold worked to a purity and a geometry that no jeweller makes, because jewellers make *ornaments,* and an ornament is made to be looked at, and this was not made to be looked at; this was made to *do something*. This was a *part*. The surface was cut with concentric channels of a regularity that put the cold finger on the back of his neck and ran it slowly down — he didn't need the gauge, he could *see* the tolerance, the way you can see a true edge clear across a workshop, the way the eye knows *flat* before the straightedge confirms it — and the channels were not decoration. He made himself slow down, made himself check. Decoration repeats. Decoration is rhythm; it pleases by returning. These channels did not return. They *varied* — narrowing here, deepening there, the spacing changing by amounts too small and too deliberate to be a hand's wandering — and they varied the way the teeth of a cut gear vary, to *work*. And at the centre, where the channels ran down and resolved into one another, someone had cut a single shallow vector — a direction and a depth, an arrow that was not an arrow, a thing an engineer would cut if an engineer had to say, to another engineer, across a gulf of language and time, *the next one is that way, and that far down* — across a distance and a darkness and, Ben understood with a slow horror that was indistinguishable from awe and tasted exactly the same in the mouth, across the floor of an *ocean*.

"Where did you get this," Ben said. His voice had gone somewhere quiet, somewhere it didn't usually go on camera.

"India," said the old man in the corner, the first thing he'd said. His English was unhurried and exact, each word set down where it was meant to go and not a millimetre off. "A woman read it off a drowned chamber in the sea off her own coast, and gave it to us, knowing she would never see what it pointed to. She handed forward the bearing,

not the answer. That is the only honourable way to carry a thing like this — you carry it to the next pair of hands, and you let go." He lifted the tea, drank, set it down without a sound. "She could not read it once it left her shore. Nor can we. Miss Sefton is a fine surveyor, Hesham here has three doctorates, I am an old man who has kept temples — and among us we cannot make it say one more word. It is tuned to a place it has not yet reached. It points down your Nile — to a chamber under the sea off Alexandria, the far end of itself — and it will not say *how far down,* nor *how to open it,* until something nearer that end *answers* it." He turned the tea glass a quarter turn on the chair arm, a small precise habit. "We thought we needed a man who could read tolerances. We were half right. You are the half that measures."

"And the other half?" Ben said.

The room went still in a way that told him the other half was the actual subject, had been the actual subject before he'd left Cape Town, before the manifest was sold, and that he — the chyron, the circus act, the liability with the good cars after him — was a hammer they had been forced to bring to a job that needed a *hand*.

"Sit down, Meneer van Kerk," said Jakobus, gently, from the doorway. The sunglasses were off now; the pale eyes were steady and turned full on Ben for the first time, and there was nothing performing in them, which was somehow worse. "There is a woman in the Khan el-Khalili who, ten days ago, stood in front of a piece of broken basalt behind glass in the museum and made it warm. With her hand. With her *attention*. She put her fingers near it and it answered her — and a guard heard a note that wasn't there, and a French restorer she works for says the girl came back grey to the lips and has been off her food since." A pause; the fan turned through it. "She does not know what she did. She thinks she is mad, or sickening for something, or both. She is the single most important person on the surface of this earth, and she is, at this exact moment, sitting on a stool in a workshop off the copper lane repairing a brass tray for that Frenchwoman, and she has *no idea,* and we would very much like to keep it that way for as long as is kind — because the moment the wrong people learn what

you have just learned, she stops being a person and starts being a *thing somebody wants to own*."

Ben looked at the gold disc with its impossible channels and its arrow that ran under the sea. He looked at it the way he'd been trained, without wanting to, his whole working life — looked at it for what it *was,* and could not unsee what it implied. A part wants a machine. A machine wants an operator. The instrument did not need a reader. It needed a *match*.

"And the wrong people," he said slowly, and the slowness was a man arriving somewhere he did not want to be, "already know."

Nobody helped him say it.

"Because I made the map." The words came out flat, the deadpan failing him on the last of them. He thought of two men by a pharmacy with matching shoes. He thought of the black SUV the river had closed over. He thought of thirty-one million views and a number that updated every time he refreshed it, and of the chyron — *not the work of the Egyptians* — that he'd watched go round the planet in a weekend and felt, God forgive him, a hot bright flush of being finally, *finally* seen. "I went on the most popular show on Earth, sat in a leather chair, and *told them where to dig.* Drew the whole thing on a napkin. Held it up to a camera."

Nobody contradicted him.

"Ja," said Jakobus, not unkindly, the single syllable carrying all the weight the deadpan had dropped. "You did."

The fan turned. The bars of dusty light had moved an inch across the marble while they talked; the old man's tea had gone cold and he hadn't minded. Somewhere below in the heat a car alarm went off and was ignored by a city of eleven million people who had heard everything. And Ben van Kerk, who had wanted for ten years — wanted it the way you want water — to be *believed,* sat in a soft old room in Garden City with a piece of impossible gold cooling under the fan-light and understood, with the particular clarity of a man reading a tolerance he

cannot argue with, that he had finally, catastrophically, been believed by exactly the wrong man — and that a woman he had never met, who was at this moment bent over a brass tray three lanes deep in the Khan, was going to be handed the bill.

Chapter 4 — The Stone That Was Glad

She went back to the museum because she couldn't not, which was, she was beginning to understand, the whole problem with being afraid of something: the fear made a door, and you spent all day standing at the door pretending you weren't.

It was a Tuesday again. She told Tarek she had errands — and Tarek, bent over a coffee-pot brace with the loupe screwed into his eye, had grunted the grunt that meant *fine, go, but the Frenchwoman's tray is due Thursday* — and she put on the green scarf because it was her favourite and a small dishonest part of her felt she should look nice for it, for the stone, which was insane, which she knew was insane. She walked up Talaat Harb in the late gold light, past the koshary place where the steam rolled out the door smelling of fried onions and cumin, past the old man who sold single cigarettes out of a flattened pack on his knee, past the boys hammering a football against the closed shutters of the shoe shop, the *bang* of it keeping a kind of time with her pulse. The whole street was the colour the city went at this hour — every window a sheet of beaten brass, the dust hanging gold in the slant of it, the muezzin's first call lifting somewhere off to her left and another answering it further off, the two voices crossing over the rooftops like birds.

She paid her thirty pounds. She went up the wide tired marble stairs into the cool dark, and she did not let herself slow down until she was

in the quiet hall where the school groups didn't go — the hall that smelled of stone and floor-wax and the particular dryness of very old air — in front of the case, in front of the broken corner of black stone with the label that didn't know what it was. *Statue base, provenance unknown, Old Kingdom (?).* The question mark sat there like a shrug. She stood and her heart went and she thought, *all right. All right. Prove I imagined you.*

She put her hand up. Near the glass. Not touching.

And the stone was glad.

There was no other hour of her life like this one, and there would not be another for a long time, and some part of her, even inside it, knew it and tried to hold it the way you try to hold the last of a dream: the note came up through the floor and the bones of her feet and her legs and gathered in her chest, a single low sustained tone that was not in her ears but in *her,* the way her own pulse was in her, and the cold black stone behind the dirty glass went warm — she could feel it from a foot away, a warmth that *reached,* that leaned toward her hand like a cat leans into a palm — and under the note and the warmth was the thing she had no word for, the recognition, the gladness, the feeling of five thousand years of patient cold stone *knowing she had come back,* and this time, because she was ready for it, because she had decided to be brave, she did not snatch her hand away.

She held it there. And she let herself, for one second, two, three, *believe it* — and the note rose. Not louder. *Truer,* the way a string comes into tune, and the stone's warmth bloomed up her arm to the elbow, and for a heartbeat the dim hall went — she would never be able to describe this, not to Tarek, not to anyone, except to the one man who, three weeks later, would tell her he had *measured* it and that made her want to weep with relief — for a heartbeat the hall went *gold,* gold the way the lane went at dawn, every dust mote standing up in the light, the whole tired room briefly lit from inside as though she had reached out one brown finger and, without meaning to, curled the light around her knuckle the way she had when she was four and had

since entirely forgotten she could.

"*Allah,*" said a voice behind her, very quietly.

She turned. There was a man at the end of the hall, and another man, and they were not looking at her like people look at a woman alone in a museum. They wore good shoes and bad expressions. They were looking at her the way the Frenchwoman looked at a tray she had decided to buy — that flat appraising stillness, the arithmetic of *what will it cost and where do I put it* — and one of them was already speaking into his collar, his mouth barely moving, his eyes not leaving her.

And there was a third man — a foreigner, sandy, mid-forties, with a hard tired face and an open canvas bag over his shoulder — standing frozen ten feet away by the doorway with a small steel instrument halfway out of the bag and forgotten in his hand, staring at her, staring at the *stone,* staring at the place where the air had just been gold, with the expression of a man whose entire careful religion has just walked up and shaken his hand.

Nobody moved. The note faded out of her chest. The warmth let go of her arm, reluctantly, like a hand. The hall was just a hall, dust and wax and the dead air of kings.

"Miss," said the foreigner, in English, urgently, quietly, not coming closer, his free hand coming up flat and slow the way you gentle a horse. "Miss. Don't — don't run yet. The two behind you—"

The two men behind her moved.

Afterward she could never put the next four minutes in order, only in *colour.* That was how it came back to her, ever after: not as events but as a smear of pigment, Cairo turned all the way up.

The first man came fast and quiet and his hand closed on her arm above the elbow, hard, fingers finding the bone — and the foreigner's voice was no longer quiet, it was a *crack* of it across the marble, "*Hand*

off her—", a word she felt in her teeth. And then the foreigner did something with the steel instrument that she only understood later was a laser scanner, eleven thousand dollars of precision metrology swung on its strap like a sling, like David's, the whole hard weight of it arcing up off his hip — and the *thock* of it off the side of the first man's skull was an obscene and final sound, and the man let go of her arm and went sideways into a glass case of canopic jars with a noise like the end of the world, glass and limestone and four thousand years of someone's liver going down together.

"*Now* run," said the foreigner.

She ran. Her hand was in his — she didn't remember taking it, she just had it, his grip dry and hard and absolutely certain in a way that her whole spinning body grabbed onto like a railing in a quake — down the marble stairs three at a time, her green scarf streaming, an attendant shouting her name to God, a whistle splitting the air behind them, the second man's footsteps slapping marble somewhere too close, and out — *out* — through the great doors into the white blast of the afternoon and the red dust and the noise, the wall of heat hitting her like a hand, into Tahrir, into the roundabout that ate the world, eleven million people and half their cars all going somewhere at once and none of them stopping for anybody.

"Don't think," the foreigner panted, head whipping left, right. "Just — taxi. *Taxi—*"

And then there was a dented black-and-white taxi cutting toward them through the impossible traffic, nosing across two lanes against the grain of everything, with a Cairene woman leaning out of the passenger window with a phone in each hand, shouting "*GET IN GET IN you idiots get in,*" and the foreigner shoved Layla into the back so hard her shin caught the doorframe and he dived in over her and the door wasn't even shut before the car was moving, threading the gap between a microbus full of faces and a donkey cart stacked with lettuces, a margin Layla could have measured with her two fingers held up to the light. The driver was a kid, sixteen maybe, grinning like it

was his birthday and his wedding both, laying on the horn as both an instrument and a prayer.

"Down," said the woman in the front, not turning, her voice flat and level as a spirit-line. "Both of you, *down*. Land Cruiser off the corner." A pause, calm as a surgeon counting swabs. "Two. Tarek's-uncle's-nephew, *ya habibi* — the meat market. The one I showed you Ramadan—"

"*Aiwa, ya Mama Dalia—*" The kid yanked the wheel with both hands and his whole shoulders, and the taxi left the roundabout sideways, the back end coming round, the tyres finding grip on nothing and then on everything.

It went down an alley that Layla, who had lived in this city her entire life, would have sworn on her mother no car could fit — and it fit, just, the wing-mirrors brushing the walls on both sides like a man squaring his shoulders through a crowd — past a wall of hanging carcasses dark and glistening, past a man with a cleaver the size of a shovel who roared something heartfelt and anatomical about their mothers as they went by, and the world outside the window became a strobe of it. Copper. Blood. Hibiscus-red drying on a step. The green of a mosque-flank. A child's blue dress in a doorway, a flash and gone. The gold of the late light strobing between the buildings like a film run too fast. And Layla pressed against the foreigner's side on the floor of a stranger's taxi, her cheek to the cracked vinyl, her heart trying to climb out of her mouth — and discovered, to her absolute astonishment, in the middle of the most terrifying afternoon of her entire life, that some traitor part of her was *exhilarated,* that some part of her that had spent twenty-six years being the background figure in her own city, the girl behind the counter, the daughter, the *which one was she again,* was screaming *finally, FINALLY, something is happening to ME—*

and she started, helplessly, with her whole body, to laugh.

The foreigner looked down at her on the floor of the taxi as if she had grown a second head.

"You're *laughing,*" he said.

"I'm sorry—" she gasped. "I can't—" and couldn't stop, the laughter coming up out of her in waves she had no governor on, tears squeezing out at the corners, her shoulders shaking against his ribs, and the more she tried to stop the worse it got, because the cleaver-man's face had been so *outraged,* and they were on the *floor,* and a stranger's mother was running them through a meat market with two phones, and she was apparently a woman the whole world wanted to *carry away,* and none of it, *none* of it, was anything her ordinary Tuesday had promised when she'd lied to Tarek about errands.

And something happened in the foreigner's hard tired face — a crack of his own, a thing that fought its way up against ten years of weight and ridicule and the wrong man's belief, and won for exactly one second. Ben van Kerk, who had been called a grifter on six continents and a prophet on the seventh, who had been believed by the wrong man and had not laughed, *really* laughed, in longer than he could honestly remember, looked at the woman the whole world was about to come for — this woman who could make the air go gold and was lying on the floor of a hijacked taxi *giggling,* helpless with it, alive with it — and felt the second half of his careful life tilt the rest of the way over and slide off the bench.

"*Jissus,*" he said, soft. He scrubbed a hand down his face. "Okay. Yes. Fine. It's a little bit funny." The taxi shot out of the alley into a wider street and the daylight came back and the kid in front whooped and slapped the dash. Ben let his head fall back against the seat. "Right." He put his hand out, low, between them, where she could see it. "Ben."

"Layla," she said, wiping her eyes with the heel of her hand, the green scarf slipped half off her hair and she didn't fix it. She took his hand. It was steadier than hers. "Layla." And then, because the laughing had emptied her out and left only the question underneath, the one that had been waiting since the hall went gold, it came out of her bare and small: "Why are people trying to take me? *What did I do*

to the stone?"

And Ben van Kerk opened his mouth to give her the careful answer, the true answer, the answer he had spent a decade earning the right to give and had crossed an ocean to deliver — *you didn't do anything to it, you woke it, it's tuned to a tolerance no hand should be able to hold and it answers you, it's been waiting for you, you are the thing every box and obelisk and statue from here to Aswan was cut to need—*

— and found, looking at her, at her wet bright eyes and her trembling hands and the green scarf and the *not-knowing* still wrapped around her like a held breath, that he could not. Not yet. Not in the back of a car still hot from the chase, not while she was still half-laughing, not while she still had this — the last hour of being only Layla, the last of the ordinary she was ever going to get to keep.

He had measured a thousand things in his life and never once flinched from a number. This was the first time in years he chose, on purpose, not to read one out.

"Nothing," he said. "You didn't do anything to the stone. It's me they want." A beat. "I'm — professionally inconvenient. Long story. Boring one. Mostly about a podcast." He got most of the way to a grin. "Sorry I got you into it."

Up front, Dalia met his eyes in the mirror, one long flat look, and did not call him a liar, because some lies are mercy and she had eyes in her head and could see what the girl was holding and what it would cost her to put it down. She had buried no famous idiots yet and did not intend to start with this one.

"Khan el-Khalili," she told the kid, settling one phone, lifting the other. "Back way. Behind Hussein, where the brass men are." She thumbed a number. "The upstairs people will want her somewhere with one door and friends on it. And the family gets told before the wrong people tell them — *ya* Layla. *Habibti*. Who's at home? Just a name. We send someone good. Someone who'll drink tea and frighten nobody."

"My — Tarek," Layla said, dazed, the world rearranging itself around the fact that this stranger already knew she had a *home,* a *family,* a life with a shape these people could reach into. "My cousin. The workshop. Off Muski."

"Tarek the restorer. Good. We know the shop." Dalia spoke three soft fast sentences into the phone in an Arabic too quick and too local for Ben to catch more than the shape of, and rang off, and let the unimpressed mask sit back down over her face. Then she glanced once more into the mirror — at the foreigner who'd swung eleven thousand dollars at a man's head, and the woman who made stone glad, the pair of them shoulder to shoulder on her back seat like two children sent home from a wedding — and the mask did the thing it did not often do, which was soften, just at the corners.

"And somebody," she said, to the mirror, to Ben, "is going to have to tell her. *Ya* Ben. Not today. But soon." The taxi slowed into the thickening current of the old city, copper light pouring down the lane, the smell of cardamom and hot brass and frying coming in the window. "The men in the Land Cruisers already know it. And lies are a debt." She looked away, out at her city, at the lanterns just beginning to come on. "And this city always collects."

Chapter 5 — A Direction and a Depth

The safe flat in the Khan was above a spice merchant, three flights up a stair worn into smooth hollows by four hundred years of feet, and it smelled of cumin and cardamom coming up through the floorboards so strongly that Ben would associate the two scents with fear for the rest of his life. The lamp on the low table threw the room into amber — the walls hung with cheap kilims to muffle sound, a single window shuttered against the alley, the call to prayer rising somewhere over the rooftops and dying into the city's permanent hum of horns and copper-hammering and a hundred thousand kettles. Layla sat on a low couch with her brother's hand crushed in hers — they had brought the boy, Tarek, white-faced and furious and nineteen, because Dalia had been right and you did not leave a family in the city for the wrong people to find — and she would not look at the gold disc on the table.

She had looked at it once.

Ben had taken it out of the steel case because Sefton said *show her, we're past the point of not showing her,* and he had set it on the low table in the lamplight, and Layla had gone the colour of the spice-merchant's chalk and put both hands over her mouth, and the disc — Ben was watching for it, he would always be watching for it now — the channels, the fine tuned grooves cut into the gold to a tolerance that had no business existing, had caught the lamplight, and the light had moved along them, once, all the way around the spiral — and Ben had

felt the hair stand up on his forearms and the back of his neck and had thought, in the only language his fear spoke, *capacitance, resonance, coupling, she's a node, she's the missing node,* and had hated himself for reaching for the words, and had reached for them anyway, because they were the rail he held in the dark.

Now the disc lay quiet on the table between them all, and the silence in the room had teeth.

"Somebody tell me the truth," Layla said, carefully, to the room, in English, so Tarek would follow.

She did not raise her voice. That was the thing Ben noticed, the way he noticed a tolerance — the deviation from what you'd expect. A person this afraid should be loud. She was not.

"You keep looking at each other. Since the museum. Since the *market*." She watched them. "I'm a restorer's assistant, monsieur. My job is seeing the thing under the thing. The crack under the paint. The join under the gold leaf." Her mouth was tight. "And under all of you there's a thing you won't say. You pass it between your eyes like a hot stone. None of you will put it in my hand." She turned her head and looked at her brother, at his bitten lip and his fury, and her voice cracked, just once, on the next words, and then went level again, which was worse. "My brother is in this room because of me. Nobody will say why." Her hands shook. Her voice did not. He noted both. "Eleven days I've thought I was losing my mind. I put my hand near a piece of dirty basalt behind dirty glass and it — it *greeted* me. Like a person. Like an old friend. And I told no one, because what is there to tell? *I think the museum likes me?*" A short, terrible breath. "I'd rather be in danger than mad. So." Her hands shook. Her voice did not. He noted both. "What am I?"

The Order looked at each other.

And the old Egyptian man — who had said almost nothing the whole flight up the stairs, who had ridden in the back of Dalia's second car with his eyes half-closed and his hands folded on the head of a cane

he did not seem to need, who had climbed the four hundred years of stone and taken, again, without asking, the one good chair — Hagg Yusuf set down his glass of tea on the brass tray with a small clear chime, and said, "No."

Sefton turned, sharp. "Yusuf—"

"No," said the old man again. Not loud. Gently, immovably, the way the river says no to a stone — not by pushing, but by simply going on being the river until the stone gives up its shape. He did not look at Sefton at all. He looked at Layla, and Ben watched the look pass between the two of them, the only two Egyptians in a room full of foreigners and money and instruments, and understood that whatever was being decided here was being decided in a language the rest of them only thought they spoke.

He was quiet a moment, and his thumb moved on the head of the cane, back and forth, the way an old man's hand does when it is somewhere else entirely. "My grandmother," he said, to no one, almost. "She washed the dead. In Sayyida Zeinab. It is a thing you must be taught slowly — how to tell a person what has happened to them, when the worst of it has happened already and there is no undoing it." He looked up.

"*Ya bint,*" he said to her softly — *daughter* — and Tarek's head came up at that, at a stranger calling his sister so, and then went down again, because there was nothing in the old man's face to fight. "I will tell you. I promise you that I, and not these others, and not this man with his instruments" — a tip of the head toward Ben, not unkind, almost amused — "will be the one to tell you what you are. Because it is an Egyptian thing, *ya bint,* and it should come into your hands from Egyptian hands. Not from the man who flew across the world to explain your own house to you on the television."

Ben opened his mouth. Found nothing in it worth saying. Closed it.

"But not tonight," Hagg Yusuf went on, "and not in a room you were chased into. With your brother frightened beside you and your heart

still running from the market like a hare. No, no." He shook his head once, slow. "A truth like this — you do not throw it down a stair at a person. You carry it. With both hands. The way you carry water from the tap to the room and do not spill it, and do not spill it, *ya bint,* the whole way." He picked the tea glass back up, turned it once in his fingers, watching the mint leaf rise. "We will carry you to it. I will carry you to it. Tonight — be safe. Be Layla, only Layla, and sleep. Tomorrow, *insha'Allah,* I begin."

And Layla — who had braced for the worst, who had braced for *mad-woman,* for *tumour pressing on the part of the brain that makes ghosts,* for *djinn,* for *demon,* who had walked up four flights of four-hundred-year-old stairs with every one of those words in her mouth and not once, not for a single step, braced for *an old man with a riverbed face telling her gently to go to sleep* — Layla looked at Hagg Yusuf, and something deep inside her undid itself by one full notch, audible almost, a held breath let partway out, and she nodded, and pressed her lips together, and did not cry. Quite.

Tarek looked from the old man to his sister and back, and the fight went out of his shoulders by degrees, and he did not understand any of it but he understood *that* — that someone in this room of frightening strangers had just refused, on his sister's behalf, to be cruel to her with the truth. He gripped her hand tighter. She gripped back.

Ben, against the wall, watching, felt the rebuke land exactly where the old man had aimed it. *An Egyptian thing. Egyptian hands. The man who flew across the world to explain your own house.* He, who had spent a decade and a marriage and a career becoming the one man on the surface of the earth who could stand before the wonder of Egypt and *measure* it for the watching millions — he was not, it turned out, the man who got to explain this one. Not this. Not her.

He filed it, because filing was what he did. He did not yet *feel* it. That would come later — in a tunnel, in the cool breathing dark under Saqqara, with a feeler gauge cold in his fingers and a granite box older than the idea of Egypt going *warm* under a girl's open hand, and his

whole worldview down on its knees in the dust. But for now he only filed it, and was quiet.

Later — when the boy had finally folded down onto the floor against the couch like a colt giving up, and Layla had gone still beneath a borrowed blanket with one hand still loosely keeping her brother's, and the lamp was turned to its lowest amber thread — the grown-ups stood at the shuttered window, and Sefton showed Ben a photograph on her phone, shielding the screen with her body out of habit.

"This came six hours ago," she said, very low. "Friend in the Antiquities Ministry. Owes the Order more than he can repay, and knows it. It's a guest list. Private dinner, last night, a house on the Giza road that doesn't officially have an owner. Shell holding a shell."

Ben angled his head into the glow. It was a phone photograph of a printed list — heavy cream stock, a caterer's logo at the foot, twenty-odd names ranged down it in a typeface that cost money to look that expensive. Most of the names meant nothing to him. Diplomats, he guessed. Money. The kind of people who got their dinners catered by firms that printed lists.

One of the names stopped his heart for the second time that day.

"Caspian Roeg," he read aloud, and felt his own voice go strange.

"You know him."

"Everyone knows him." His mouth had gone to dust again. "More money than some countries have GDP. Resources, satellites, a private fleet of — everything. Ships. Submersibles." He stopped. "He raised a Roman galley off Sicily two years ago. For a lobby. He wanted it for a lobby." He looked at the sleeping shape of the girl on the couch, and he made himself say the rest of it, out loud, in the small lamplit room, because not saying it was a kind of lie and he had told enough lies of omission for one lifetime, told them to himself mostly, all of them shaped like *I didn't ask, so I didn't know.*

"He funded the survey," Ben said. "Eighteen months ago. Anonymous, through a foundation in Liechtenstein. Paid for the muon-tomography I could never have afforded in a hundred lifetimes. The scan that proved the voids." A beat. "The voids are *his money*. I took it." He heard the words come out flat and ruined. "Never asked where it came from. I wanted the data more than I wanted to know." He breathed. "And then I took what his money bought me, and I went on the biggest show on the planet, and I told the whole world what's down there." He turned from the window. "Which means I told *him*. In words a clever child could follow. The most valuable thing on earth, and where to dig."

"He believed you," said Hagg Yusuf, from the good chair, not opening his eyes, his old voice unhurried in the dark, "before the clever men did. That is the dangerous kind." He was quiet a beat. "There was a man, when I was young. Collected the old Coptic icons. Bought them, traded them, blessed himself in front of every one. Loved them better than the priests did, *wallahi*. And one night the church at Maadi found its icon gone, and everyone said — no, not him, the man *loves* these things." A small movement of the hand. "That is how he took it. The one who laughs at you, *ya doktor* — pah. He has decided not to look. He is nothing. It is the one who kisses the thing he means to steal who comes in the night and stands in your street with his engine off."

Ben said nothing. There was nothing to say to that, because it was true, and because the old man had aimed it perfectly, again.

"What does he want?" Tarek's voice, low and rough, from the floor. Not asleep after all. Nineteen, and pushing his voice down into a register he hoped sounded like a man's. "With my sister?"

The room went quiet in a new way.

Hagg Yusuf was a long time answering. When he did, he chose each word the way — Ben would later understand — Layla chose where to set the chisel, slowly, with the whole weight of the choice in the hand before the hand moved.

"He is a man," the old keeper said, "who decided, somewhere far back, that the only thing that cannot be taken from you is the thing you *own*. He was taken from once. Badly — such men always were, you can hear it under the money, like water under a floor. So he built a fortress, and the name of the fortress is *mine*." A breath. "And now he has learned — because this good doctor told the world and the world told everyone — that there is a machine older than history lying drowned off Alexandria. The most valuable thing that has ever been or will ever be. And that all his money and all his ships cannot switch it on." He opened his eyes. Looked, with a tenderness that was somehow more terrible than any anger could have been, at the sleeping girl on the couch, at Layla, who made stone glad. "Because it can only be woken by a person. So he wants to own the machine. And to own the machine, he thinks he must own the switch."

Tarek made a sound he tried to swallow.

"He will not get her," said Jakobus Swart.

He had been standing in the dark by the door the whole time, his back to the jamb, his sunglasses off and folded into his collar, his pale eyes never once leaving the slice of alley visible through the gap in the shutter. He said it the way another man might confirm a weight or a distance — flat, level, entirely without heat — and that absence of heat was somehow worse than any threat could have been, because it was not a wish or a vow. It was a measurement.

"I've moved better-guarded cargo than one sleeping girl. Past worse men than a billionaire with a feeling." He did not turn from the shutter. "We leave before light. Dalia's got the cars staged — two, splitting at the ring road, switching plates at Imbaba." He glanced at Ben, once. "Giza first."

"Giza," Ben repeated. "Toward him. The plateau's crawling with—"

"The bearing wants Giza," Jakobus said, unbothered. "Your disc and her hand read the next step. We can't read it in this room. So." A small shrug. "And his people will look for us running *from* the plateau.

Not at it. A man who owns things can't picture you walking up to the one with the teeth and putting your face in front of it." The corner of his mouth moved and was gone. "Honey badger. You go straight at the thing everyone runs from, like it's nothing, and the lions watch and decide it isn't worth it." A pause. "Just don't hurry."

Ben looked around the low amber room — at the old man with the riverbed face folding his hands again over his cane; at the unimpressed fixer and the South African ghost at the door who killed when he had to and never bragged about it; at the furious boy on the floor with his fists still half-clenched in sleep; and at the girl beneath the blanket, breathing slow now, finally, her face gone young and unguarded in the dark, a kid who had washed stone-dust off her hands that morning like any other morning — and he understood, with the clean cold certainty of a number coming up right, that his quiet, careful, radioactive, lonely life was over. That something louder and more dangerous and, God help him, more *alive* had started up in its place. And that he had started it himself, four thousand miles away, with a grin and a sound bite and a chyron under his face.

He reached out and picked up the gold disc.

In the low amber light, with Layla three feet away and breathing slow, the channels caught the lamp and *held* it — warm, gathered, *pointed*. A direction and a depth. Meena had read this much off the drowned coupling-chamber half a world east and handed it forward across the ocean without knowing where it led; and here it lay in his hand, and Ben van Kerk — engineer, crank, prophet, fool, the man who took the money and didn't ask — turned the disc slowly in the lamplight until the shallow vector cut into its centre lay along the line he already knew in his bones, west and south, out past the dark sleeping edge of the city, to the plateau where the makers' hand still lay unmoved on the stone after eleven thousand years.

"Okay," he said softly — to the disc, to the dark, to the start of everything. "Okay. Giza."

Outside, four flights down, in a street that smelled of cumin and

cardamom and fear, a black Land Cruiser sat with its engine off and its headlights dark, two wheels up on the broken kerb where the alley met the wider lane. A man inside it watched the one shuttered window leak its thread of amber, and lifted a phone, and said, in the unbothered voice of someone who has never once in his life failed to get the thing he wanted:

"Found them. Three flights up, over a spice shop. They're moving at first light, two vehicles." He listened. "No. Don't touch her. Mr Roeg was very clear on that point." A pause, while the engine ticked and cooled and the call to prayer wound down somewhere over the rooftops. The man smiled, in the dark, to himself.

"Let the crank read it for us first."

Chapter 6 — The Heirs

There is a thing the plateau does at dawn that no photograph has ever caught and Ben had stopped trying to explain to people, which is that for about eleven minutes the three pyramids are not monuments at all. They are *weather*. The sun comes up out of the desert behind them and the limestone, which is grey-gold and dull in the day, catches the low light and goes — first rose, a blush running up the faces from the sand-line; then a hard apricot; then, for a minute, blinding, all three of them lit like struck matches against a sky going from violet to white — and the air off the desert is cold and smells of nothing, of clean stone and distance, and the city behind you is still asleep under its own brown haze, and you stand on five thousand years of somebody's certainty in the cold and the gold and you understand, in your body and not your head, that whatever you thought you knew about *people* and *time* was sized for a smaller world.

Layla had stopped walking. She stood at the edge of the plateau with the green scarf pulled up against the dawn cold and the light coming up apricot on her face, and she was crying, openly, without embarrassment, in a way Ben had not managed in a decade and envied.

"I've lived here my whole life," she said. "An hour away. School trip, I was nine. I bought a plastic camel." She wiped her face with the back of her hand and laughed, a wet ruined sound. "It melted in the car. Cried more for the camel than I'm crying now. And I'm crying *now,* so." She gestured at the three faces of fire. "Nobody told me it was

like *this*."

"Nobody tells anyone," said Hagg Yusuf, beside her, leaning on his stick, looking up at the Great Pyramid with the particular calm of a man looking at something that belongs to him in a way no deed could improve. "They sell you the camel. They do not sell you the dawn. The dawn is free." He said something to her in Arabic, low, the cadence of it old and certain, and she laughed again and answered, faster, and Ben stood three feet away and felt the language close around the two of them like a room he wasn't in, and made himself not mind, and mostly managed.

Dalia had got them onto the plateau before the gates, before the ticket booths, before the camel-touts and the tour buses, by a route involving a cousin, a service road, a gap in a chain-link fence held open with a fist, and a sum of money that Sefton had counted into a man's palm with the pained face of a woman watching the Order's budget bleed out into the sand. They had perhaps two hours before the site filled.

"Two hours," Jakobus had said in the dark of the van, scanning the desert with the flat moving eyes, the shades pushed up because there was no sun yet to need them. "Then you can't tell a tourist from a man of Roeg's." He was certain Roeg's men were already here. He was equally certain they were doing exactly what Ben would do in their place, which was nothing at all. Watching. Letting the crank read it first, and then taking the answer off him.

"Right," Ben said, and pulled the canvas bag around, and the act of opening it steadied him the way it always did. The gauge. The straightedge. The little laser. The field recorder. The tools of the only court that had never lied to him. "Let's go and look at the part that doesn't make sense."

He took them inside, up through the cramped descending throat of the thing and into the Grand Gallery — that vast corbelled slot rising

into the dark, the walls leaning in over their heads in steps, the slope steep and polished glass-slick under their feet — Layla's hand finding his on the worst of it, gripping hard, and him noticing, and saying nothing, and the two of them going up into the mountain hand in hand like children on a fairground ride that had been built before the flood.

The King's Chamber waited at the top of it. A bare box of red granite at the heart of the world's largest pile of limestone, and Ben watched her face as the granite closed around them, and he watched her *feel* it before he could measure it.

"Wait." She had gone very still. The note — he couldn't hear it, but he could see it land on her like weather coming over a hill. "Ben. The whole room is—"

"I know. Hold on. Let me show you why." Because this was the thing, this was the *whole* thing, this was the difference between him and every grinning podcast host who'd ever floated the word *aliens* at him across a microphone: he would not let the wonder land until he had *earned* it, until he had put the unfakeable thing in her hand first. He crossed to the wall, to the great seams where blocks of red Aswan granite weighing more than buses met each other, and he set the steel straightedge against the stone. "Look. Watch the gap." He fed the leaves of the feeler gauge in, one and then two and then trying for the four-thousandths and not getting it, the steel refusing, the joint refusing, and he watched her watch the steel refuse.

"Granite," he said. "*Granite*. Seventy tonnes a block. Quarried eight hundred kilometres south at Aswan, floated down the river, dragged up the plateau, lifted fifty metres into the air, and set against the next block tighter than the doors on a German car. The story says copper chisels and stone hammers and a great many patient men with rope." He sat back on his heels, and his voice went quiet, the lecture burning off and leaving the thing underneath. "I've run a machine shop. I've cut granite with diamond saws and water-jet and a computer holding the tool to a thousandth. *I* can't do this. Not like this. Not at this scale, not to this tolerance, not without leaving a single tool-mark a

microscope could find. And neither," he said, "could they."

He had said it a thousand times. He had said it on the most popular show on Earth, leaning into the mic, *neither could they,* watching the host's eyes go round. He said it now, in the chamber, with the granite humming a note he couldn't hear and Layla and the old man both turning to look at him — and he heard it land *wrong.* Heard the *neither could they* go out into the red dark and curdle. Saw Layla's face change. Saw the old man's go still.

And understood, a full beat too late, exactly what he had done.

"Say that again," said Hagg Yusuf. Quietly. Dangerously quietly.

"Hagg Yusuf—"

"'*Neither could they.*'" The old man took a step into the lamplight, and he was not large and he was not loud and the room rearranged itself around him the way it had not, once, rearranged around Ben. "You stand inside the heart of the thing my ancestors built — *built,* young man, with these—" he held up his own hands, old and broad and scarred, a conservator's hands, a craftsman's hands, hands not unlike Layla's "—and you tell this girl, this *Egyptian* girl, in the house of her own dead, that her people *could not.*" It was not a shout. It was worse than a shout. "I have heard your podcast, Mr van Kerk. My grandson played it for me. Proudly. Because a famous man was speaking of Egypt. And I sat in my chair and I wept. Because I have given forty years to handing this place back to the people it belongs to — undoing two centuries of clever foreign men explaining to us, in their journals, that we were too small to have made our own glory. And here comes another clever foreign man. With better instruments." His voice did not rise. "And a kinder heart. To do the very same thing in a softer voice."

"That is not what I—" Ben started, and stopped, because the awful thing, the *measurable* thing, the thing he could not argue with because he had built his whole reputation on never arguing with the gauge, was that it was *exactly* what he had said. *Neither could they.* He had

measured the joint to a thousandth and the *people* not at all.

"Listen to me," said Hagg Yusuf — and now he did the thing Ben would carry for the rest of his life. He took Ben by the wrist, the grip dry and strong, and he walked him to the place near the chamber's mouth where the impossibly-cut granite met the work beside it, the human work, the careful dynastic fitting, and he pressed Ben's own hand flat against the stone. "You are right about the granite. I will give you that — you measure better than the men who laughed at you, and the joint *i*s impossible, and I have wondered at it my whole life. So. Yes. Say an older hand than ours cut this. Say there was a knowing before the dynasties, and my fathers *found* it. I can hold that. It does not wound me. A great house is no shame to the family that inherits it and tends it three thousand years."

He turned to Layla, and his whole face opened, the anger gone, replaced by something Ben envied more than the language: pure, unguarded pride.

"Is that the work of a people who *could not,* ya bint? Or the work of the greatest heirs the world has ever seen — who were handed a wonder, and did not cage it, and did not sell the camel, but *built a world around it,* and kept it five thousand years?"

Layla put her hand flat on the dynastic stone. On her ancestors' stone. And she was crying again, but it was a different crying.

"The second one," she said.

"It is the second one," said Hagg Yusuf, and the chamber, which had been holding its breath, let it out.

Ben van Kerk stood with his hand on the joint between the impossible and the human and felt something he had no instrument for and no word for and could not, for once, reach for a number to hold — because the number wasn't the point, the number had *never* been the whole point, and a man who had given his life to measuring things had just been shown, in a red room under a mountain, the one thing he had been measuring wrong.

"I've been getting it wrong," he said, slowly. "Not the granite. The granite's right. But every time I say *they didn't build it,* I let thirty million people hear *they couldn't.* And I never — *jirre*." He looked at his own hands. "Ten years. I've been so busy being right about the stone I never once checked whether I was being decent about the people."

"That," said Hagg Yusuf, with the first warmth he had shown the engineer, laying a hand on his shoulder, "is the most useful sentence you have spoken since you got off the plane. Hold onto it. You'll need it where we're going." And then, because he was a kind man under the iron, he added, drily, "And now perhaps you will let the girl listen to the room. Since you have at last stopped explaining it to her."

So Ben stepped back. And he let the wonder land.

Layla turned to the granite.

She had been afraid of the note all this time. Afraid of the gladness of it, of what it meant about her, of the way the stone seemed to *know* her in a city where she had spent her whole life being known by no one. But she had just watched an old man stand in a tomb and refuse, for her sake, to let her people be made small — and something in her chest had come unclenched — and she found, to her own astonishment, that she was not afraid. She was *curious.*

She lifted both hands toward the great red wall, not touching — the gesture she had practised since the broken fragment behind dirty glass. And she let herself believe it. And—

The chamber answered.

Not the small glad note of the museum piece. This was the whole room, the whole mountain — the granite *rang,* a single sustained tone so low and so vast that Ben felt it land in his sternum, in his fillings, *heard* it this time, actually heard it, the room sounding like the lowest pipe of the largest organ ever built. The lamplight bent and pooled.

The air went gold. Every grain of dust in the cold stood up off the floor and turned, slowly, in the light. And Layla stood at the centre of it with her hands raised and her tears and her green scarf and her face lit from somewhere inside, and she was, in that moment, the most beautiful and the most frightening thing Ben had ever seen — because she was *operating* it, she was *playing the mountain,* and she didn't know how, and she didn't know why, and someone was going to have to tell her, soon, what that made her.

And in the corner, Ben — recovering, reaching, because he was who he was — had the field recorder out, and was staring at its little screen with his mouth open.

The meter was pinned.

Sixteen hertz. A sixteen-hertz tone filling a sealed granite room with no speaker, no machine, no source, nothing in the whole chamber that could make it but a five-thousand-year-old box of stone and a crying woman's raised hands. And he had it. He had it *on the meter.* It was real, it was *measured,* and that meant—

"It's real," he whispered. To her. The kindest, truest, most useless three words he had. "Layla. Whatever you are — *I can measure it.* You're not mad. You were never mad. It's real. And I can *prove* it."

Layla lowered her hands. The note faded. The gold drained out of the air and the chamber was just a red room again, bare and cold and impossible, and her ears rang in the new silence.

She looked at him — at the foreigner who measured, at the one person who had just handed her, instead of a diagnosis, instead of a careful look and the word *unwell,* a *proof* — and the look she gave him then was the beginning of something that would thread under the terror all the way down the Nile.

"Then you'd better tell me," she said, unsteadily, "what it is you're going to prove."

And from the entrance to the Grand Gallery, in the dark beyond

the lamplight, a new voice — cultured, amused, delighted, and entirely, casually certain — said:

"Oh, *please* don't stop on my account." A flashlight clicked on, swung up, found Layla's face and held it, gentle as a caress and twice as cold. "That was the single most beautiful thing I have ever paid to see. And I have paid—" Caspian Roeg stepped into the lamplight in a cream linen suit that had no business being unwrinkled fifty metres inside a pyramid, smiling at all three of them in turn, last and longest at the woman who could play the mountain. "—for a *great* many beautiful things."

Chapter 7 — The Man Who Pays

The granite had been singing all morning — that was the only word Ben had for it, and he hated the word, and it was still the right one. He had come up into the King's Chamber before the first tour group, before the heat, in the deep red hush of the world's most famous box, to do the one thing that made him feel sane: measure. The straightedge across the lid-rebate of the coffer. The feeler gauge sliding home where it should not have fit. The flatness of a five-thousand-year-old surface that a modern shop would quote him an apology for. And Layla, two metres back, with her hand not quite touching the wall, her eyes half-shut, her lips moving, listening to a note that no instrument he owned could find — except that when he laid his palm flat on the coffer after she did, the stone was warm, and the warmth was wrong, and the warmth was *true*.

So when the footsteps came up the ascending passage — measured, unhurried, the wrong tempo for a tourist and far too confident for a guard — Ben already knew, in the animal way, that the morning's wonder was about to acquire a price.

Caspian Roeg was younger than he expected and better-looking than was fair, with the kind of light tan that costs money and the kind of linen suit that costs more, and he came up into the King's Chamber alone, hands spread, smiling, with two large quiet men staying back in the dark of the gallery behind him in a way that said he could be alone

because of them, not instead of them.

"Mr van Kerk," he said, warmly, crossing the chamber with his hand out as though they were at a gala. "Caspian. I feel I know you." His voice filled the red room and the red room gave it back to him, that famous flat acoustic, the dead air the makers had tuned and the dynasts had inherited. "Watched the podcast. Everyone's watched the podcast. I funded the muon survey — did they tell you? Through the foundation. So I've watched you longer than the crowd has. Fan from before it was a stadium." He looked, frankly delighted, around the chamber — at the granite, the great relieving courses overhead, the coffer with Ben's straightedge still lying across it like a surgeon's tool abandoned mid-cut. "And here we all are. In the *machine*. God, isn't it. You were *right,* Ben. Right about everything, and they laughed, and here we *are*."

Ben did not take the hand. He felt Layla go still at the edge of his vision — felt it the way you feel a draught change. "Get your men away from her."

Roeg followed his glance. Layla had stepped half behind Hagg Yusuf, the old custodian, and she was looking at Roeg the way you look at a snake that is being charming — and Roeg's face did something genuinely complicated, a flicker of real feeling under the gloss, there and gone. "I'm not going to touch her," he said, and he sounded hurt. "I'm not a thug, Ben, whatever Swart's told you. Hello, Jakobus." He nodded into the dark, where Jakobus had not moved, had not taken off his sunglasses even in the gloom, and was — Ben understood with a small cold jolt — the only reason Roeg's two men were staying back at all. "Still working for the people who *hide* things. Such a waste of a useful man."

"I work for the people who *keep* them," said Jakobus, mildly, from the dark.

"Same thing, with better PR." Roeg turned back to Ben, and the charm came back up like a tide. "Here's what I want. I'll be honest, because you're the only person in this cave who'll appreciate honesty as a *technique*." He spread his hands. "I want the machine. The whole

instrument — Giza, Saqqara, the obelisk, the chamber under Abu Qir, all of it. The relay your disc is pointing down. I've known about it longer than you think. Been *funding* the search for it longer than you think." He smiled. "I funded *you*. You're part of how I found it. The crank they couldn't kill turned out to be the map."

"Why," said Ben. It came out flat. It came out the way it did when he was frightened and reaching for a number to stand on and there was no number to be had.

"Because it *works,* Ben." And here, for the first time, the gloss thinned and something real and hungry showed through, and it was not greed exactly. It was *want,* naked, almost childlike. "You measured the tolerances. You know what they're *for*. That's not architecture, it's *engineering* — a tuned resonant system the size of a continent, drowned and coupled across the sea floor, by people who understood materials and harmonics in ways we're *centuries* from. And it's *sitting there*. Switched off. At the bottom of the Mediterranean. The single most valuable technology in the history of the species — and the academy's too *cowardly* to even look, and the governments too *slow,* and so it falls to the only kind of person who ever actually moves the world." He smiled, and it was sincere, and it was terrible. "A man with the money and the nerve to *own* it. Power that doesn't run out. A weapon nobody else has. Or just — the answer. Who they were. How they did it. Don't you *want* to know, Ben? After ten years in the cold? Don't you want to *win*?"

And here was the trap, and Ben felt it close, and something in his chest lurched toward it before he could get a hand on it — the academy humbled, his name on the proof, unkillable, the men who'd called him a grifter eating it on every channel that had ever cut to a clip of him — *no*. He shut the thought down the way you smother a spark on your sleeve, fast, before it could be seen. It was only a second. It was a second he would not tell Layla about for a long time.

The coffer was warm under his fingers. He realised his hand had found it. He made himself let go.

"And the price," Ben said, slowly, because he already knew, because there was always a price and the price was always in the room.

Roeg looked at Layla.

He looked at Layla, and the want in his face changed shape but not size, and he said, gently, reasonably, as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world, "She comes with me. Willingly — I'd far rather willingly, I have reason to think it has to be willingly — and I'll give her *everything*. She'll never be ordinary again. Never be overlooked again. The most important person alive — which" — he smiled at her, and the smile reached his eyes — "is more than this city's ever offered you. Isn't it? I *see* you, Layla. I know what it is to be the only one of your kind and have nobody understand it. To be looked through. Come and be understood. Come and be *valued*. Properly. At your true price."

The chamber was silent. Somewhere far below, the first tour group was laughing on the causeway, a sound from another world.

And Layla — who had spent twenty-six years being a background figure, a girl who fixed brass trays in her uncle's shop, who had that very morning watched the air go gold at the touch of her own two hands and not slept since the basalt first answered her, who had every reason on earth to be flattered, whom Roeg had read with horrible accuracy — Layla stepped out from behind Hagg Yusuf, and looked the richest man in the world in the eye, and said:

"At my true *price*."

"I mean it as the highest possible—"

"You said *price*." Her voice was shaking and it did not stop her; if anything the shaking sharpened it. "You looked at the most frightening, most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me — the thing I have not slept for, the thing I have been so afraid of I have wanted to give it back — and the word you reached for was *price*. Like a tray." She was breathing hard, her chin up, her hands in fists at her sides. "I fix trays, Mr Roeg. Brass trays, in the Khan, with my uncle, three streets from where I was born. I know exactly what it sounds like when a tourist

is deciding what a thing is worth before they take it home. The little tilt of the head. The way the hand comes up." She mimed it — turned an invisible object to the light, weighed it, *valued* it — and it was the most contemptuous thing Ben had ever seen her do. "You're not the first foreigner to stand in this country and put a number on something that was never for sale." She lifted her chin a degree higher. "I would rather be ordinary and *mine* than priceless and *yours*."

Roeg looked at her for a long moment, and the red room held its breath.

And then he smiled — slowly, and it was a different smile, an appreciative one, a *collector's* one — and Ben's blood went cold, because it was the smile of a man who has just watched a thing he wanted turn out to be even better than he'd hoped, and is therefore even more determined to have it.

"Oh," said Caspian Roeg softly, delighted, "you're *magnificent*. I'm going to enjoy this so much more than I expected." He stepped back, spreading his hands, the gala host again. "Take your time. Read your disc. Run your little relay down the river — I'll be right behind you, I wouldn't *miss* it, and frankly you'll save me the trouble of reading it myself. You always were the most expensive thing I ever bought, Ben. Every dollar of that survey, and you didn't even know you were on the books." He was already walking backward into the dark mouth of the gallery, between his two quiet men, his flashlight swinging up to catch the corbelled stone. "And when you reach the end — tired, frightened, out of road — you'll find I'm a *very* patient collector. And that everyone, Layla — *everyone* — has a price. Even you. *Especially* the ones who say they don't." His teeth flashed white in the dark. "Just a question of the currency."

"*Run,*" said Jakobus, very quietly, the instant Roeg's light dropped out of sight down the gallery.

For half a second Ben didn't understand — and then he did, all at once, cold: the polite exit had been a curtain. Roeg's two quiet men had not followed their master down. They had peeled off the moment

his light moved, into the black low throat of the antechamber, where the ceiling dropped to a metre and there was nowhere to run and nowhere to swing—

It came apart fast and ugly. A shape lunged out of the dark for Layla — for her, always for her now — and Ben got an arm across her and his shoulder into the man and they went into granite, his head cracking off five thousand years of perfect stone, white sparks, the smell of dust and the man's aftershave. He heard Hagg Yusuf shout something in Arabic, heard Tarek hauling the old man bodily down the polished slope of the Grand Gallery — and saw, in the swinging phone-light, the thing Jakobus did to the second man, which was almost nothing at all and which Ben would never afterward be able to put in order. The man came on hard in a space too small to swing in, and Jakobus did not meet the force; he *went around* it — a half-turn of the hips, a hand at the man's elbow that looked, for a quarter-beat, oddly like courtesy, like a man steering a guest through a doorway — and the attacker's own momentum, with nowhere of its own to go, kept going where Jakobus pointed it, into the corbelled stone and down the polished slope and out of the fight, all of it flowing, none of it struck, the violence hidden inside what looked very nearly like a dance. There was no crack, no cry. The man simply arrived where Jakobus had sent him and stopped being a problem.

Then Jakobus had Layla's collar in one fist and Ben's in the other and was *moving* them, down, down through the cramped descending throat of the pyramid where the air went thin and the dark pressed in and the only light was the bobbing of someone's phone-torch, three of them stumbling and bent double and breathing each other's panic—

—and then the white. The blinding white punch of the Egyptian morning as they burst out of the mouth of the Great Pyramid into a plateau that was no longer the serene dawn Ben had measured by. It had filled up. Tour buses, ranks of patient camels, hawkers with strings of scarab keyrings, a thousand tourists in sun hats turning their phones to the wonder — and, cutting black lines across all that ordinary gold, three vehicles converging across the sand, fanned wide, herding.

Dalia's beautiful dented Peugeot came fishtailing in off the service road with the rear door already swinging open and her voice already shouting over the horns. "*GET IN, get IN—*" Her radio was crackling on the seat: *company on the plateau, three vehicles—* her own voice, recorded a minute ago in someone else's panic.

"The disc!" Layla shouted, over the chaos, over the horns and the camel-handlers' curses, her hand crushing Ben's so hard it hurt — *her hand, always her hand now* — her face white and alive and lit from somewhere he couldn't see. "Ben — *down the river,* he said — the disc, I felt it, it went *warm,* it's pointing, it *knows—*"

And Ben van Kerk, running flat-out across five thousand years of sand with the most important person on Earth's hand crushing his, the gold disc burning warm against his sternum through the canvas of the bag — three carloads of a billionaire's men closing the gap and a city of eleven million roaring beyond the plateau edge — threw himself and her into the back of the Peugeot, and laughed.

Actually laughed — the second time in a decade — because she was right, because he could feel it too now, the heat of the thing through the canvas, low and certain, a compass made of gold and physics he could not yet explain and did not, in that instant, need to. Because the instrument was waking up. Because it was pointing the way and there was nothing to do now but follow it and stay alive.

"South," he gasped, as Dalia floored it and the world lurched. "You're right — south. Saqqara. Dalia — *Saqqara,* go—"

"*Saqqara,*" Dalia confirmed grimly, hauling the wheel hand over hand, the Peugeot diving off the plateau road into the brown roaring surf of Cairo traffic, three black shadows folding into the river of cars behind them, "where they keep the boxes." She slid the car through a gap between a tour coach and a fruit cart and oncoming eternity, and the disc was warm, and Layla was laughing now too, breathless and terrified and alive, and Ben thought: *yes. South. Follow the heat.* "Brought your little ruler, ya Ben?" Dalia said, flooring it again, the engine screaming, the minarets and the diesel haze and the whole

impossible gold-and-grime sprawl of the city swallowing them whole. “Because from what they say about those boxes—” the car shot a gap that closed behind them like water “—you are going to *need* it.”

Chapter 8 — The Boxes

After the noise of the plateau, Saqqara was a held breath.

They came in the late afternoon, by a back track Dalia knew, the kind of track that wasn't on any map and never would be, a rut of grey dust between low stone walls where a man with a single goat watched them pass without changing his face. The Step Pyramid stood off across the sand the colour of old bone, terraced like a thing built by hands that wanted to climb to something, and the necropolis spread out flat and silent and enormous under a sky going from blue to bronze. After the camels and the buses and the thirty million views, after the chase and the charm and the close cramped violence in the dark of the Grand Gallery — Ben still had it in his shoulders, the smell of a stranger's breath, the man's hand closing on Layla's sleeve before the four of them had broken him loose and run — after all of it, the silence of the place came down on them like a hand laid flat on the back of the neck.

Even Tarek stopped talking. Tarek, who had narrated the entire drive south as though Saqqara were a thing he personally owned and was prepared to discount for cash, fell quiet in the back seat and looked out the window at the tombs going gold and said nothing. Even Dalia drove slow, both hands on the wheel, easing the old Land Cruiser over the ruts as if the ground itself were sleeping and she didn't want to wake it.

"You feel that," Layla said. She had her forehead almost against the glass.

"Feel what," Ben said, because he was the kind of man who said *feel what* even when he felt it.

She didn't answer. She didn't need to. He felt it.

Hagg Yusuf had a man here — of course he did; he had a man everywhere, a lifetime of men, custodians and conservators and the sons of custodians, the long quiet network of the people who actually keep Egypt while the world photographs it. The man was called Khaled, a Saqqara site-keeper whose father and grandfather had kept it before him, and he met them at a steel door set into the rock with a ring of keys older than some countries. He embraced Hagg Yusuf with the unhurried thoroughness of men who have buried people together, and then he turned and looked at the rest of them with the deep reserve of a man who has spent his whole life watching foreigners arrive wanting things — Ben felt himself sorted, weighed, found to be exactly the kind of person he was — and then Hagg Yusuf said something to him, low, in Arabic, with a hand on his arm.

And Khaled looked at Layla. Differently. The way Hagg Yusuf had first looked at her, that first night, before any of them had a word for it. He looked at her for a long moment, and something moved behind his face that wasn't reserve any more, and he unlocked the door.

"Until the morning watch," Hagg Yusuf translated. "After that there are other eyes. Not all of them ours. Some of them now Mr Roeg's." He let the name sit. Roeg had been charming on the plateau at dawn, charming in the way of a man who has never once been told no — *I funded that scanner, Ben, the one in your own video. I believed you when the cowards laughed* — charming right up until the moment the men in the Gallery put hands on Layla, and then not charming at all. "So. A night." Hagg Yusuf looked at Ben. "Khaled's family has kept this place since before your country existed, Mr van Kerk. He is letting you bring a ruler into the holy of holies because I have told him you do not measure a thing in order to *take* it." A pause, weighted. "Don't make me a liar."

"I won't," Ben said. And meant it. The morning's lesson was still on

him like a bruise — the keeper's voice on the plateau, quiet, unanswerable: *you keep saying inherited as though it is a small word.*

They went down.

The Serapeum is a tunnel cut into living rock, and going into it is going into the dark and the cool and the dust, down and down a ramp into a long straight gallery lined on both sides with niches, and in the niches—

Ben had seen the photographs. Everyone had seen the photographs. He had built half his reputation on the photographs, had sat in a chair under a microphone with sixty million people listening and held one up to a camera and said *look at this, just look at it.* And the photographs were *nothing.* The photographs were a lie of scale, a flattening, a betrayal, because no photograph could put you here, in the breathing dark with your torch-beam swinging and the air gone cold against your sweat and the floor sloping down under your feet into the rock, standing at the foot of the first box.

It was the size of a bus. No — it was bigger than a bus. It was a single piece of stone, granite, dark, the hardest meanest stuff there is, hollowed out into a chamber a man could stand up inside, with a separate lid of the same stone resting on top, and the whole thing weighing — Ben's brain supplied it automatically, the way it always did, reaching for a number the way a frightened man reaches for the wall — somewhere north of seventy tonnes for the box and another thirty for the lid. Lowered into a niche cut to receive it with a clearance you could close your eyes and *feel* was wrong, was *too good*, down here under a hundred feet of rock, in the dark, five thousand years ago, by somebody.

Nobody said anything. The torch-beams moved. The dust hung in them, slow, turning, lit from below. Somewhere far down the gallery, water dripped, and the sound went on a long time before it landed.

"Okay," Ben said, and his voice came out wrong, hushed, and he

cleared his throat and it didn't help. "Okay."

He climbed up. The granite was cold under his palms, colder than the air, holding the dark like a battery holds charge. He put his hand inside the box, flat on the interior wall, and he felt it before he measured it — the way you feel a true edge, the way your skin tells you a thing is flat a half-second before your eye agrees — and his stomach dropped through the floor of the world.

"Layla." His voice cracked on her name. "Light. Here. *Here*."

She came up beside him, quick, the torch steady in her two hands, and she didn't ask *feel what* now. She just held the beam where he pointed.

He unzipped the bag, and the zip tore loud through the breathing dark, and he set the empty bag down against the granite. He got the straightedge out of the bag, the good one, the granite-surface-plate-grade straightedge he carried everywhere the way other men carry a wallet — a metre of precision-ground steel, lapped flat in a temperature-controlled room in Germany to a flatness measured in microns. He laid it against the inside wall of the box, against the dark granite, and he put his torch behind it, low, raking the way you check a surface for light leak, and his hand was not entirely steady doing it.

There was no light leak.

"Look," he whispered. He didn't trust his voice above a whisper. "Look at the gap behind the steel."

Layla leaned in. Hagg Yusuf leaned in. And Khaled, who had kept this place his whole life, who had stood beside these boxes longer than Ben had been alive — Khaled leaned in too, because no one had ever shown him *this*.

"There's no gap," Layla said.

"There's no gap." Ben drew the steel along the wall, slow, a metre of precision steel travelling flat across a five-thousand-year-old granite surface in a tunnel in the desert, and the line where they met stayed

black, stayed shut, no thread of torch-light getting under it anywhere along its length. "This wall is flat. Not flat like a good builder. Flat like an *optical* flat. Like the reference surfaces we make in a metrology lab, in a clean room, at twenty degrees exactly, to *calibrate other instruments against*. You understand what I'm telling you? This isn't a *good* surface." He had to stop and breathe. "This is the surface you'd use to *check* whether another surface is good."

"Ben." Layla's voice was very quiet.

"And it's not one wall. Watch this." He moved along the box to the corner — the inside corner, where two interior walls came down to meet the floor, and *this*, this was the one, this was the thing that had ended one career and started a stranger one, this was the impossible thing he'd staked his name on while men in tweed laughed into their wine. He brought the torch in close, almost touching. "Inside corner. Look. Square. *Sharp*. No radius, no rounding — it just *stops*. Wall to wall to floor. Three flat planes." He turned to look at her, at all of them, his face white in the up-light. "Cut a square hole into anything — metal, stone — with a rotating tool, you *cannot* make the inside corner sharp. Your tool is round. It leaves a radius. It's not a difficulty. It's a *law of geometry* — you literally cannot put a sharp inside corner in with a spinning cutter, it's like asking for a square circle. To get a corner this clean on the *inside*, today, you'd spark-erode it. Broach it. A machine that costs more than a house. In steel. On a part the size of your fist."

He sat back on his heels in the dark, and his hands, he noticed distantly, were shaking, and not from fear this time.

"And they did it. In granite. On a part the size of a *bus*. On *dozens* of them." His torch wandered down the gallery, finding the next box, and the next, the niches receding into the dark two by two like the nave of some cathedral built for a god that didn't survive.

"Ben," Layla said again.

He didn't hear her. He'd gone somewhere ten years deep. "I got a quote, once. A real granite shop, in Italy. The best in the world —

ESA contractors, the people who make the mirror-mounts for space telescopes, men who lap stone for a living and have never once been impressed by anything. I sent them the survey of one of these. Asked them, professional to professional, what it would cost to reproduce. To these tolerances. This material." He laughed, and there was no humour in it, none, only the pure terrified awe he had spent ten years of his life defending against people who wanted very badly for him to be a fool. "They sent it back. Written across the top, in red pen, by hand. They wrote—" his voice went, and came back— "*We cannot do this.* The best granite shop on Earth. *We cannot do this.*"

The silence in the tunnel was total. Even the far-off water had stopped.

And it was Khaled who broke it.

Khaled the site-keeper, whose family had kept these boxes for a hundred years, who had heard a thousand tourists say *wow* through a phone held up to film, who had heard a hundred professors say *sarcophagi* in the bright dry voice of people writing captions, and who had never once, in his whole life, watched a foreigner kneel in the dust and lay a calibrated steel edge against the stone and go *white*. He stepped forward. He put his own rough hand inside the box, on the impossible flat wall, the way Ben had, palm flat, the way a man tests a thing he has known for thirty years and never been allowed to say. And he spoke, low, in Arabic, a long sentence, and then another, and his voice was not steady either.

Hagg Yusuf did not translate at once. He let it stand in the air first, out of respect. Then he did, quietly, because it deserved to be carried into English whole.

"He says he has worked beside these boxes for thirty years. The scholars come, and they write *coffin*, and they go. And he has always known — *known*, in his hands, the way a craftsman knows wood is dry or stone is true — that the scholars were missing something. That these were not coffins. That no one in the world, in any age, buries a bull in a thing made *this well*." Hagg Yusuf paused. Khaled was still

looking into the box. “But he could never say so. Because he had no instrument. And the foreigners,” — the faintest dry weight on the word — “only believe an instrument.”

Khaled turned then, and looked at Ben directly, and finished it himself, in careful English, each word set down like a stone laid level:

“He says — *thank you for bringing the instrument*.” Hagg Yusuf’s voice had gone soft. “*Now. Tell me what they are*.”

And Ben van Kerk, kneeling in the holy dark with a feeler gauge in his fist and the whole vindication he had ever wanted handed to him — finally, not by a podcast, not by sixty million strangers, not by any algorithm, but by an old man’s *thank you* in a tunnel under the desert — Ben opened his mouth to say the thing. The *real* thing. The thing past the measurement, the thing that came after *we cannot do this*, the *what they are*.

He drew the breath to say it.

And that was the moment Layla, who had drifted away from them down the gallery into the dark — drawn the way she was always drawn now, since the basalt behind the museum glass, since the granite at dawn, helpless and glad and a little afraid of her own feet — that was the moment Layla stopped before the next great silent box in its niche, and made a small sound, a soft catch of breath, almost a word.

And the box answered her.

Seventy tonnes of single-block granite, hollowed and lidded and lowered into living rock five thousand years ago, optically flat, impossibly cornered, cold as the grave —

— under a hundred feet of stone, in the dark, for the first time in five thousand years —

— began, very softly, to ring.

Chapter 9 — What the Boxes Are For

The box rang, and Layla rang with it.

That was the only way she could ever describe it, after, to Ben, in the dark, in a whisper, because Ben was the only one who would not look at her differently for saying it: that the stone did not make a sound *at* her, the stone made a sound *through* her, that she and the great granite box were two halves of one note and the note had been waiting five thousand years to be whole and now it was, and it poured up out of the floor and through the soles of her feet and the bones of her legs and her spine and out the top of her head into the dark, and she was, for a moment, not afraid, was not a person at all, was a *tone,* clean and enormous and at home.

And the dark went gold.

The torch-light bent. She heard Ben swear, behind her, very quietly, *jirre,* heard the others go still, but it was far away, it was happening to other people; here, in the gold, in the note, she lifted her hands toward the box the way you lift your hands toward a fire, and the box leaned toward her, all seventy tonnes of it leaning the way the broken fragment had leaned, the way the mountain had leaned, *glad,* glad to be found, glad to be played, and she understood for the first time that the gladness was not the stone's.

It was hers. The stone was only giving it back to her.

She had been so lonely. She had not let herself know it until this exact moment, standing in a tunnel under the desert with a granite box ringing her like a bell: she had been lonely her whole life, the background girl, the one things did not happen to, the one who fixed other people's beautiful things and went home — and here was a thing, an enormous ancient impossible thing, that had been built, somehow, by someone, *for her*. That had waited for her. That was *glad she existed*. And the relief of it, the sheer flood of being *wanted by the world* after twenty-six years of being furniture in it, was so total that she did not, in that gold moment, care what it cost.

She wanted to stay there. That was the thing she would not tell anyone, not Ben, not Hagg Yusuf, not even, later, herself: that some part of her, the lonely part, the furniture part, wanted to dissolve completely into that note and never come back, because to be a tone was so much simpler than to be a girl. The box held the door open. All she had to do was walk through and stop being Layla.

The note faded. The gold drained, and the cold of the deep tunnel came up to meet her, the chill of the rock through her thin shoes, the dust dry in her throat, somewhere far back a drip of water counting itself out. She came back into herself standing in the dust with tears on her face and her hands still raised and four people staring at her, and one of them — Khaled, the keeper, the man whose family had kept this place a hundred years — was on his knees.

Not in fear. She saw that at once; she had been afraid of fear her whole strange life and she knew its face and this was not it. Khaled was on his knees the way you go to your knees in a mosque, the way her grandmother went down at the threshold of the Hussein, his forehead nearly to the rock, and he was weeping, openly, and saying something over and over, low, and she looked at Hagg Yusuf to translate and found that the old man could not, that the old man's own eyes were wet, that the old man was looking at her, finally, with the thing she had been bracing against and dreading and was now, somehow, not — not pity, not fear, not the flat careful look Dr. Aubert's face had worn when she was four and could not understand it.

Recognition.

"Hagg Yusuf." Her voice was very small in the great dark, and it came out of her shaking, because the gold had left her cold the way a fever leaves you cold. "It's time. Isn't it." She wiped her face with the back of her wrist and only smeared the dust into it. "You said you'd be the one to tell me. I held a *mountain* this morning. I just rang this — this *thing* like it was a glass, and Khaled is on his knees crying in a language I don't think is Arabic." Her chin trembled and she set her teeth against it. "I'd rather know. Please. What am I?"

The old man came to her, slowly, leaning on his stick, and the others did not move, did not breathe — even Ben, up the tunnel, who had gone so still he might have been carved into the wall beside the box. And Hagg Yusuf did not stand over her. He sat down — just sat, with a small grunt and a long old man's care, on the dusty floor of the tunnel, lowering himself bone by bone to the ground beside her so that she would not have to look up at him to hear it — and he laid the stick across his lap, and he looked at the great ringing box, and he began.

"First — what *they* are. Because you cannot understand what you are until you understand what these are for." A nod up the tunnel toward Ben, who did not move. "That clever man, he was about to tell you. And it is right that he proved it with his ruler — that is his gift, and it is a real one. But it is not his to *name*. So." He laid his old hand flat on the floor, on the living rock, the way a man lays his hand on the flank of a horse he loves. "Your engineer is right. These are not coffins. They are made too well for any use my ancestors put them to. They are tuned — the flatness, the squareness, the impossible corners, those are not *beauty,* they are *function*. The way the holes in a *ney* are not decoration." He looked at her, and the torch-light moved in his wet eyes. "They are *instruments,* ya bint. Resonant chambers. Each one cut to a pitch. Part of something vast — your engineer would say a machine. I do not love the word. A machine is a thing you use, and these you *play*. The makers left them all down the spine of this land and across the floor of the sea. Tuned. Sleeping."

"And my ancestors." The word came out of her with a weight she had not expected — *my* ancestors, *real* Egyptians, hers, the people whose blood ran in her and whose city she lived in. "They found them."

"They found them." And now the old man smiled, and the pride came back into his face, the same fierce love he'd shown that dawn in the King's Chamber, the love that had made Ben go quiet and put his ruler away. "Empty. Silent — because the makers were gone, and they had taken with them the one thing the instrument needed. We will come to that. My ancestors found these great tuned stones in the dark and did not understand them — how could they; we still do not — but they understood that they were *holy*. That something far older and far greater had made them." He spread his hands, and the gesture took in the tunnel, the boxes, the dark, the whole drowned spine of it. "So they did the most honourable thing a people can do with a wonder they inherit. They *kept* it. They put their most sacred things inside — the Apis bulls, the living gods, the most precious dead they had. Not because the boxes were *made* for bulls. Because when you are given the gods' own instrument and cannot play it, you fill it with your own holiness and you guard it until someone comes who *can*." His voice thickened and he let it. "We were the keepers, ya bint. Not the makers. The *keepers*. And it is no shame. The men who write the books think we are smaller because we did not cut the stone. They have it backwards. It is no shame to tend a great house you did not build. It is the highest calling there is. We kept it safe and silent for five thousand years—"

"—until me," Layla whispered.

The tunnel was utterly silent. Even the water that dripped somewhere far back in the dark seemed to hold its drop and wait.

"Until you," said Hagg Yusuf.

And he took her hand — her hand, the one Ben was always holding, the one that made the stone glad — and he held it in both of his old scarred ones, gently, the way you hold something you have been entrusted with, something fragile and enormous at once, and he said the

thing, finally, the thing the whole long road from the museum had been keeping, the thing she had been four years old and bending light and not knowing, and twenty-six and ringing mountains and not knowing, and he said it not as a diagnosis and not as a price but as the truth it was:

"The makers built it. They tuned every stone of it to a perfection no hand of ours could match, all down the river and under the sea. And then they left. And took with them the one part they could not cut from stone." He pressed her hand. "An instrument is nothing without a player, ya bint. A *ney* is a stick with holes until breath goes through it. This has lain here five thousand years, perfectly tuned and perfectly silent. Waiting. Not for a clever foreigner with a ruler. Not for a rich man with an army. Not for a scholar or a king." He looked at her, and his old eyes were full, and so were hers, because she already knew, she had known since the gold in the museum, she had known since she was four and Dr. Aubert had looked at her the way you look at a thing you cannot explain. "Waiting for the one whose own self rings *true* to it. A living key. The foreigners would say a *resonant match*. My grandmother would have said *the one the stone remembers*." He smiled through it, and a tear went down into the white of his beard and he did not wipe it. "You, ya bint. The instrument has been waiting, all this time, in the dark, all down the river, under the sea, for *you*. You are the breath in the *ney*. You are the thing the makers could not leave behind and could not take with them. You are not mad. You were never mad. You are the most important person who has ever stood in this tunnel, and you are an ordinary girl from the Khan who fixes brass trays, and both of those are true, and I am so sorry, and I am so glad, and I will help you carry it, because that is what we do. We are the keepers. We always have been."

And Layla — who had wanted, more than anything, just to *understand,* just to not be mad —

understood.

Because she felt it land, the whole shape of it, the gold and the

gladness and the ringing mountains and the man in the linen suit who had stood in the King's Chamber with his soft voice and said *price* — she felt all of it resolve into a single, simple, unbearable fact, and the fact was not *I have a power*.

If I am the breath in the ney, she thought, with perfect clarity, *then I am not Layla. I am the part of the machine they couldn't cut from stone.* And the fear came up cold and certain behind it: *Everyone — Roeg, the Order, all of them, even Ben, even kind Ben who measures — everyone in this tunnel and everyone Roeg will send is going to want to play me. To pick me up and put their breath through me. And the most frightening thing is not that they'll take me.*

It's that part of me is so glad to finally be wanted that I'm afraid I'll let them. That I'll hand myself over to the first man who says he needs me, just to keep being needed.

She did not say it. She had learned, in twenty-six years of being a background figure, how to hold a large thing behind a small face — it was the one skill the furniture-girl had that the cosmic one did not. She squeezed the old man's hands. *"Shukran, ya Hagg."* Thank you. And she let him believe she was only frightened in the ordinary way, the way a person is frightened to learn she is important, and not in the other way, the way a person is frightened to learn there is a door inside her that wants to open.

But up the tunnel, in the dark, leaning against an impossible box with a feeler gauge forgotten and dangling from two fingers, Ben van Kerk — who had spent the whole speech being, for once, completely quiet, who had not reached for a number, who had not said one word about tolerances or pitch or what the boxes were *for,* who had watched her face the entire time the way he watched a straightedge against granite, reading the gap of light no one else could see — saw it.

He saw the small face hold the large thing. He saw the door behind her eyes, and he saw her shut it, and he saw what it cost her to shut it. He'd spent ten years learning to hold it on camera, in front of millions, so they would not see the man drowning behind the showman. He

knew the look from the inside. And he pushed off the box and came down the tunnel through the gold-dust dark, past Khaled still on his knees, past Hagg Yusuf who watched him come with the patience of a man who has just handed his most precious thing to a stranger and is deciding whether the stranger is worthy of it, and he crouched down in front of her, in front of the most important person on the surface of the earth, on his haunches in the dust like a man at a fire, and he did not offer her a measurement, and he did not offer her the answer he was famous for, and he did not, God help him, the way Roeg had, offer her a price.

He just took her other hand — so that now she was held on both sides, the old keeper and the young engineer, the past and the proof, the one who named her and the one who measured her — and he said, very quietly, in the dark:

"You're still you. Whatever you are to the stone. You're still Layla, and you still fix trays, and you laughed on the floor of a taxi with a man shooting at us, *laughed,* like a maniac, I remember it, and none of that is the machine. The machine can't laugh. I'd bet my life on it." His jaw worked once, the muscle jumping under the stubble. "I spent ten years being the thing other people decided I was. The crank. The prophet. The grifter. The chyron at the bottom of the screen. And I'll tell you what nobody told me, what I had to figure out alone in a hundred hotel rooms eating room-service chips at three in the morning while strangers on the internet argued about whether I was a genius or a fraud and not one of them ever once asked *me*: they don't get to decide. Not Roeg. Not the Order. Not the academy. Not even me, and I'm sitting right here." He pressed her hand, hard, an engineer's grip, certain in the uncertain dark, the one thing he had that he actually trusted. "You're not a switch, Layla. You're not a *ney.* You're a *person* who can do an impossible thing. And a person gets to choose. That's the whole difference between you and the box. The box has to ring. You don't."

And Layla looked at him — at the foreigner who measured, the one person in all the gold dark who had handed her, instead of a price,

instead of an awe that made her into an altar, *a choice* — and she felt the counter-melody come up under the terror, faint and warm and stubborn, a single true note threading itself under the whole crushing weight of all that rock and all those centuries, small and human and entirely hers.

"Okay." The word cracked in the middle and she let it. "Okay." She held on to both their hands, the old one and the young one, the keeper's scars and the engineer's calluses, and she breathed, and the door inside her box of a chest stayed shut, for now, because she had decided it would. "Then somebody had better teach me to play it." She looked up the dark tunnel, toward the world, toward the man in the linen suit who was somewhere out there in the desert night with all his money and all his men, already coming. "Before he makes me."

Chapter 10 — Everything He Ever Wanted

The offer came at three in the morning, in the keeper's hut above the tunnel, while the others slept and Ben sat outside on a broken bench under the most stars he had ever seen, holding the gold disc and not sleeping, because the disc had pointed south again — *Aswan,* it wanted Aswan, he could feel it the way you feel a compass want north — and because he could not stop seeing Layla's small face holding its large thing.

The desert at this hour was a thing that did not care about him, and that was almost a comfort. No diesel, no horns, no thirty million strangers who loved a clip of his voice. Just the cold coming up out of the sand, and the band of the Milky Way thrown across the sky like the makers had cut *that* too, to a tolerance, and let it ring. He turned the disc over in his fingers. It was warm. It was always warm now, since Layla.

A phone he didn't own buzzed in his jacket pocket. He had not put it there. He took it out. It was a clean black phone, expensive, the kind of thing that costs more than a car and weighs nothing, and it was already ringing, and the screen said only: **ANSWER. — C.R.**

He should have thrown it into the desert. He sat with it ringing in his palm and felt the want come up in him before the man had said a single word, which was how he knew, even then, the size of the thing.

He answered it.

"Ben." Roeg's voice, warm, intimate, as though they were old friends, as though it were not three in the morning. "Don't get up. Don't wake anyone. This is just for us. Engineers, talking. My man slipped the phone to you in the Grand Gallery — before Swart broke his wrist, which, *ouch*. Fair enough." A soft laugh, genuinely amused, the laugh of a man who has lost a wrist's worth of pieces and isn't counting. "I wanted a private channel. The others have you confused, Ben. They've turned you into a hero in your own head, and that's a costume that never fit you. You and I understand each other. I'd hate for a misunderstanding to get someone hurt."

"Say it," Ben said.

"All right. Straight, then." A breath, and Ben heard ice move in a glass, a thousand kilometres of comfort away. "I've read your file. Your *real* file — not the podcast, the *before*. The journal that rejected the granite paper and then published a worse one by the man on the committee, eighteen months later. Same data. His name. They pulled your conference slot in 'fourteen, the morning of, after the abstracts were printed, so you flew to Vienna to sit in the back and watch them not say your name. Your supervisor called you — I'm quoting, I have the email — 'a talented boy who has chosen to be a clown.' " A pause, soft as felt. "Thirty million followers and not one of them is a colleague. And I know what that *is,* Ben. I know exactly what it is. You'd trade every one of those thirty million for one room. One small room. Of serious people who looked at your data and said it out loud, where it could be heard: *you're right*."

Ben said nothing. The stars wheeled. The disc burned in his hand.

"I can give you that room."

"You're going to anyway. Keep going."

"Not money — you don't care about money, that's why they never understood you. They thought you were a grifter chasing views, and the joke is you'd give the views away for a footnote." The warmth in the

voice deepened. "*Vindication.* The real kind. I fund — quietly, properly, at a scale that would make CERN weep — a full characterisation of the entire instrument. The boxes. The obelisk. The chamber under the sea. The best people on Earth, the ones who *can't* be bought by a podcast but absolutely can be bought by a billion-dollar programme and a Nobel-shaped carrot. They measure all of it, to your tolerances, with your protocol, and your name on the masthead. *Van Kerk* on the founding paper. The man who was right when everyone called him a clown." A pause, perfectly timed, a craftsman's pause. "The academy doesn't just forgive you, Ben. It *apologises.* In print. Forever. Everything they took — everything you've turned over in a hundred hotel rooms at three in the morning, exactly like this one — in your hands by Friday."

And here it was. Here was the trap, fully open, jaws back, and Ben — sitting alone under the desert stars with the gold disc warm in his fist — felt the wanting rise up in him like water in a flooding room, fast and total and absolutely real, because every word was true, because Roeg had read him down to the bedrock, because there was a version of this world where he simply said the one short word and woke up on Friday and was, at last, after ten years, *believed* — and the relief of that imagined morning brought tears stinging up into his eyes in the dark, and he was glad no one was awake to see them.

"And the price," Ben said. His voice came out steady. He genuinely did not know how.

"You know the price."

"Say it anyway. The way I like."

A pause; when Roeg spoke again his voice had softened. "Layla. And the chamber under Abu Qir. You walk away with the vindication; she walks toward me with the future. I'll be *good* to her — better than good. I'll give her cities. I'll give her the one job in the history of the species worth having. And I have reason to believe she has to come *willingly,* so I'm not going to drag her by the hair. That's not me. You've misjudged me there. I'm going to *win* her. I'm patient. I told her so, in the chamber, and I meant it. All you have to do" — the

voice dropped, soft as the cold coming off the sand — "is stop being the reason she says no. Stop holding her hand. Take the room. Be right. Be *finally, completely right,* in the only court that ever mattered to you. And let the girl choose without an exhausted South African whispering *you don't have to* in her ear every time she gets tired." A pause. "It's a kindness, honestly. You're keeping her from the most important destiny a human being has ever been offered. What kind of man does that? Out of — what. Three days? You've known her *three days,* Ben. Let her *go.* Let yourself *win.*"

Ben looked at the disc. He looked at the stars. He thought about the room full of serious people, the small clean room, the faces turning toward him without contempt for the first time in a decade. He thought about *van Kerk on the founding paper.* He thought, for one long terrible honest second, with his whole body, about saying yes.

And then he thought about a woman on the floor of a hijacked taxi, shaking and laughing at the same time, asking *what did I do to the stone* — and him lying to her, gently, *you didn't do anything,* the first kind thing he'd done in a year. He thought about Hagg Yusuf in the King's Chamber with his hand flat on the granite, saying *do not tell me my fathers could not.* He thought about the box ringing in the dark, that low impossible note climbing up out of five thousand years of cut stone the instant Layla came near it, and her small face afterward, holding its large thing, saying *I'm afraid I'll let them.* And he understood, with the clean cold clarity of a tolerance you cannot argue with, the exact shape of what Caspian Roeg was.

"You know what's funny," Ben said quietly. "I built my whole life on the idea that I could measure anything. Granite. Symmetry. Lies, mostly, lately. And I just measured *you,* Caspian. Took about ninety seconds. You came out very clean."

"Ben—"

"You think being right is a *thing you own.* That's the whole offer, isn't it, when you boil it down past the warmth. My name on the paper. The room of serious people. *Mine,* finally, mine, the vindication sitting

in my pocket like a title deed." He was nodding in the dark, to himself, to the wheeling stars. "And I *wanted* it. *Jirre,* I wanted it — you have no idea, except you do, that's the whole horror of you, you read me exactly right. But here's the thing you got wrong. The one thing. The load-bearing thing." His voice didn't rise. It went, if anything, gentler, which was how he knew that he meant it all the way down. "Being right isn't a trophy. It was never mine to keep. The granite is cut to four ten-thousandths of an inch whether my name is on the paper or it's on nothing. The truth doesn't *belong* to me — I just happened to be in the right room with a feeler gauge and got to *see* it a little before everyone else, and the only decent thing a man can do with a truth he saw first is *hand it on.* To everybody. Not sell it to one frightened rich man so he can carry it down into a basement and switch it on where no one else can reach the light." He took a breath of the cold, enormous air. "And the girl is not a *component.* She's not the breath in *your* ney. She's a person, and she fixes broken trays in a basement under the Khan, and she gets to choose, and I am going to keep whispering *you don't have to* in her ear until the day I die — because that, Caspian, that one thing right there, is the only part of any of this that is actually mine to give."

Silence on the line. A long one. The ice did not move in the glass.

When Roeg spoke again the warmth was gone, and what was under it was worse, because what was under it was *hurt* — genuine, structural hurt, the hurt of a man who has held out his own deepest wish to another man, cupped in both hands, and watched it pushed away — and who has concluded, as he had long ago concluded about everything in the world, that if a thing will not be *given* to him, then it must be *taken,* because the only safety is ownership and the only theft is loss.

"That's a shame," said Caspian Roeg, quietly. "I meant all of it. I'd have made you the most respected man in your field, Ben. I'd have enjoyed it. Because I do, despite everything, *like* you." A pause. "Remember that I offered. Remember that I was *generous,* and that you chose the hard way with your eyes open — when this is over and it has cost you everything. The way the hard way always does. Goodnight."

The line went dead in his hand.

And then, from down the slope, from the steel door of the tunnel mouth, somebody screamed.

It was Khaled.

By the time Ben got down the slope — running, the disc clenched in his fist, Jakobus already ahead of him and moving without hurry, the way a man moves toward a sound he has heard before — it was over, and it was the worst thing Ben had seen, and the worst part was how *small* it was, how quick, how unfair. Roeg's men had not come for Layla. Roeg was too patient for that, too certain she had to come of her own will. They had come to make a point, the way you knock once on a wall to show a man you can reach him in his own house. They had gone to the great electric hoist the conservators used to shift the lids — a yellow gantry on rails, older than Ben, kept running on prayer and grease — and they had cut the lifting cable, one clean shear with bolt-cutters, and left it, and gone, and waited for the alarm to do the rest.

Khaled had run down at the alarm. Khaled, the keeper of Saqqara, whose family had kept this place a hundred years, who had spent his whole life learning the exact weight of these stones, had got to the gantry first, and the lid — thirty tonnes of the makers' granite, optically flat, five thousand years cold — had been hanging on a cut cable in the dark over the open mouth of a box, and the strands had let go one by one while he stood under it shouting the others back. He had got them clear. He had not got himself clear.

Now the keeper of Saqqara was on the tunnel floor with his legs gone wrong under the edge of a stone the makers had cut to a thousandth, and Hagg Yusuf was on his knees in the dust with the man's head cradled against his chest, weeping the open, unembarrassed weeping of the very old, and the torch-light shook on the wall, and Layla—

Layla stood at the foot of the box that had rung for her, both hands pressed flat to her mouth, and Ben watched the understanding go into her like a blade going home. He watched her see exactly what he saw: that this was the cost of *no.* That Roeg had laid the whole world at Ben's feet not ten minutes ago, and Ben had said no, and here, already, was the receipt — a good man's legs crushed under the very wonder they had all bled to protect, and the next bill would be worse, and the one after that worse again, all the way down the river, all the way to the sea.

"He did this because I said no," Ben said. His voice came out hollow, stripped. "He did this because I—"

"No." Layla's voice cut clean across him, shaking, fierce, and she turned from the box, and she was crying, but her face was not a background girl's face any more — it was something being forged in front of him, in heat, while he watched. "No. Don't you take it. He did this because he thinks people are *things.* Khaled. And me. And you. And the boxes — all of it, *things,* to be taken, or broken, or bought." She went down into the dust beside the crushed man, beside the old keeper, and she took Khaled's hand in both of hers, and Ben saw her gather herself the way a wave gathers before it stands up — saw her decide something enormous and quiet — saw the small face stop being able to hold the large thing and simply, finally, *become* it instead. "You were right to say no." She looked up at Ben across the broken keeper, and the terror in her and the wonder in her had fused into one new thing, something that frightened him and made him fiercely, helplessly proud in the same breath. "And I'm going to learn to play it — all of it — before he can ever make me. And then I'm going to make sure no one *ever* owns it. Not him. Not the Order. Not even—" Her voice caught and held. "Get Khaled to a hospital. Then get the disc out of here. We're going to Aswan."

She pressed the keeper's hand to her own forehead — an old gesture, her grandmother's gesture, the gesture of a keeper for the kept — and held it there a moment with her eyes shut.

"And Ben," she said, opening them. "At the end of this river — you

trust me to choose. Even if you don't like it. *Especially* then." She didn't blink. "That's the deal. The only one there is."

And Ben van Kerk, kneeling in the dust of the holy of holies beside a broken keeper and the single most important person on Earth, with a gold disc burning south in his fist and a billionaire's *remember that I offered* still cold against the inside of his ear, understood that the easy half of his life was the part he had already lost — Friday, the small clean room, the apology in print, forever — and that the hard half, the half worth having, had just looked him level in the eye and asked him to do the one thing an engineer is built his whole life *not* to do, which is to trust something he cannot measure.

"Okay," he said. His own voice surprised him: steady, and his. "Aswan. And — okay. I'll trust you to choose." A breath. "I don't know how yet. Never done it on purpose. But I'll learn. *Jirre.* I'll learn."

Her lips twitched, and held it — the smile cost her everything she had left and she gave it anyway, and that, Ben thought, was the whole of it, right there in the torch-light.

Outside, above the tunnel mouth, the desert stars wheeled on, indifferent and enormous, over a continent strung end to end with sleeping instruments and one waking girl — and somewhere far to the north a patient man in a linen suit set down an empty glass and went to bed satisfied, because the hard way had begun, exactly on schedule, to do the only thing the hard way ever does.

Chapter 11 — The River

They had left Cairo in Jakobus's Land Cruiser three mornings ago — south on the river road because the checkpoints were easier to read from a vehicle than from a train, and because Jakobus drove like a man doing a job he had done ten thousand times, one hand on the wheel, the other occasionally fishing in the **field vest**.

Not gear. Not a tactical carrier. A **field vest** — somewhere between **military webbing and a fly fisherman's jacket**, pockets inside pockets, D-rings, loops, the whole thing faded to the same brown-olive-khaki family as the shirt beneath it, worn as outerwear over the open collar, bare forearms coming out below, as if the man and the clothes had been washed together so many times they had agreed on a colour. Ben, wedged in the back with his survey bag, had clocked the **kukri** on Jakobus's thigh first — the big forward-curved Nepali blade, worn in a plain leather sheath, the kind of knife a certain sort of man buys to look dangerous and never learns to use — and then the **Leatherman**, and then, over three days, at least **two folding knives** used for nails and apples and cord. What he had not clocked until the first fuel stop was the rest of the cargo. (The kukri, Ben had privately filed under *trying too hard,* which was, he would understand much later, the single most reliable thing about every object the man carried: it was filed exactly where Jakobus wanted it filed.)

The back of the Cruiser was the same lesson as the man: nothing that looked like anything. Coils of rope, a high-lift jack, jerry cans, a hard case or two, the ordinary clutter of a vehicle that spent its life

off the tar — and bracketed to the bulkhead behind the back seat, where every bush vehicle on the continent carried one and nobody ever looked at it twice, a red fire extinguisher. Ben's eye, which could not help itself, snagged on it once: the bracket was newer than the rest of the rig, the plumbing behind it a shade too neat, a thin steel line running off somewhere it had no business running. He filed it the way he filed an anomalous measurement, and on the second day, idle, he said, "That extinguisher's plumbed in funny."

"It's a fire extinguisher," Jakobus said, in the flat voice he used for closing subjects, eyes on the road. "Bush vehicle. You want one you can reach."

"I'm just saying the line —"

"It's a fire extinguisher, Ben." And that was the end of it, the way the stones had been the end of it, the way most things with Jakobus were the end of it, and Ben — who had spent his whole life being right about hardware and losing every room he was right in — let it go, and forgot it, which was, he would understand much later, the entire point of how the thing had been built.

Jakobus paid for chai and came back with dates, and when he emptied his coin pocket onto the dash to find the right change — with the coins came **stones**. Smooth ones. Tumbled. A piece of quartz gone cloudy, a crystal that threw a brief star onto the windscreen, something banded red and cream that looked like it had been chosen, not bought.

"Don't start," Jakobus said, without looking at Ben.

"I'm not starting," Ben said. "I'm observing."

Layla picked up the banded one, held it to the light, put it back exactly where it had been. "Pretty."

"They're not pretty. They're —" He stopped. Shrugged, the economical movement. "Other boys collected **kettie** stones. Slingshot ammo. I kept the ones that looked like they were **trying to be something**. Same riverbank. Different eye." He swept the stones back into

a pocket with the side of his hand, paid the vendor, and put the Cruiser in gear.

There was a smell to him that Layla had been trying to place since Cairo, and somewhere on the second hour she got close enough to ask. It came off a thing on his left wrist — not a watch, a flat woven band of dun-coloured cord, scuffed pale at the edges, knotted in a pattern too even to be jewellery and too deliberate to be nothing — and the smell was green and sharp and clean, citrus and grass and something resinous under it.

"Is that citronella?" she said. "On the bracelet. My aunt burns it for mosquitoes. Lemongrass, maybe."

Jakobus lifted the wrist a degree, glanced at it, set it back on the wheel. "It's a perfume," he said, and then, because she kept looking: "One shop. Cairo, in the back of the bazaar near the Sphinx — you'd walk past it a hundred times. A man mixes oils into little bottles and writes the names on by hand. I get the same one every time. I put a drop on the cord." A beat. "It's not citronella. People always say citronella." He left it there, the way he left everything there, and the subject closed, and Layla filed *bracelet, smells of summer, won't say why* next to *stones, won't say why* and *fire extinguisher, won't say why,* and began, without quite noticing, to keep a list.

The truck told the same lie, and Ben caught it being told.

It had read, for three days, as exactly what it looked like: an old grey Land Cruiser gone soft with rust at the wheel arches, sun-bleached, dusty, the kind of tired bush vehicle you saw a hundred of between Cairo and the cataracts and never once looked at twice — right down to the fat hessian water bag slung off the back, grimy and sweating itself cool, the forgotten-looking kit that finished the picture. It drank fuel like it had a grudge — Jakobus stopped for diesel more often than the distance explained, and paid for it without comment, the way you pay for a thing you've decided is worth it. Ben had filed *thirsty old motor* and thought no more about it, because a thirsty old motor was the most ordinary thing in the world.

Then they came up behind the trucks. A long flat stretch south of Edfu, the river on the left and the desert pressing in on the right, and ahead of them a convoy of four overloaded lorries grinding along nose to tail at the speed of the slowest, a wall of swaying cargo and black exhaust with no shoulder to use and oncoming traffic in ragged bursts. The kind of trap that cost you twenty minutes and your nerve. Ben braced for the wait.

Jakobus dropped a gear, found his gap in the oncoming, and *went*.

The old Cruiser gathered itself and pulled — not the wheezing surge Ben expected from a rusted-out farm truck but a long smooth shove of acceleration that pressed him back into the seat and kept pressing, a hard black plume coughing up behind them as the motor took everything it was given and asked for more, and the four lorries went by the window one — two — three — four like fence posts, and he was back on his own side of the road with daylight to spare before the oncoming arrived.

And in those few seconds the engineer in Ben did the thing the engineer in Ben always did when a machine surprised him: it slowed the world down and started reading. Not consciously — he didn't decide to do it any more than a man decides to flinch — but the wrongness of the thing demanded an accounting, and his mind opened a quiet room off the side of the second and laid the evidence out in it, fast, item by item. *That is not a tired diesel.* A tired diesel coughs and hunts and gives you its little all and sags; this one had come up through its rev range in one unbroken line and gone on pulling at the top where a worn-out motor has nothing left, which meant an engine a twenty-year-old farm truck does not have unless someone has been inside it — head, fuelling, more air shoved in than the factory ever intended, the work you cannot see from the outside and is the only work that matters. *That is not a stock truck.* It had gone over the broken edge of the tar without the dive and wallow a knackered farm bakkie does on dead springs; it had taken the hit flat and composed and come back level in one motion, which was not luck, which was several thousand rand of remote-reservoir damper — the serious stuff, each one running its own

oil cool in a separate bottle so it never fades however long the bad road lasts — doing exactly what several thousand rand of damper is built to do. *And the tyres.* He had felt them through the floor — bigger than stock, the soft sidewall of a proper all-terrain aired down for the soft going, the speedo lying cheerfully about how fast they were actually travelling. The whole catalogue assembled itself in the slow second and resolved into a single sentence that arrived with the flat certainty of a sum that has only one answer: *this is not a tired old Land Cruiser. This is a fast truck wearing a tired old Land Cruiser like a coat.* It had felt, for those few seconds, like nothing under that scabby bonnet was tired at all — because nothing was.

Back on the empty river road, Jakobus laid his hand flat on the top of the dashboard and gave it two soft pats, the way you'd pat a dog that had done a clean bit of work, and said, easy, half to himself, "That'll do, Bees. That'll do." He said it the way you'd say it on any good day, when the thing you asked cost nothing and the asking was almost a pleasure.

Ben sat with that, and now that he was looking the rest of it came to meet him — the things he'd clocked over three days and filed under *odd* without adding up. The German sound system that had no business in a truck this rough, bass you felt in the floor of your chest the night before while a soft-bellied man danced. The flash of yellow he'd half-seen at the last fuel stop where the shocks bolted to the axle — yellow being a colour that meant *suspension* to a layman and a specific, expensive brand of it to anyone who knew. The snorkel up the A-pillar he'd taken for farm-truck affectation and now understood was a man planning to put the air intake somewhere a river couldn't reach it. None of it on its own. All of it together. The rust was real. The tiredness was a costume the rust was wearing.

"Every cent of that's gone where it counts," he said slowly, "and none of it where it shows."

"It's a bush truck," Jakobus said, eyes on the road, in the flat voice he used for closing subjects. But the corner of his mouth moved, a

fraction, the first time Ben had seen him take any pleasure in being read — and the truck, Ben understood, was the man entire: rusty, overlooked, dismissed, and built like a held breath under the part nobody bothered to check.

Ben looked at the man in profile — **average height**, **normal build**, the **soft belly** settling when he sat, wraparound shades back on, the whole silhouette saying **Steve from accounting on a field trip** until you noticed the knife or the way he parked facing out. "You're not what I expected," Layla said.

"Good," Jakobus said. "Expectations get you killed." And he pulled into the traffic with the unhurried flow of a man who had learned, a long time ago, to **move like water** in a country that read foreigners the way it read weather — quickly, and with consequences.

By the time Dalia found them the felucca, the Cruiser was parked upriver and the checkpoints were behind them.

They went south by river because the river was the one road Roeg couldn't put a checkpoint on, and because Dalia knew a man with a felucca who owed Jakobus a debt of the kind that gets paid in silence and a fast quiet boat, and so for two days and a night the most important person on the surface of the earth sailed up the Nile under a lateen sail the colour of old teeth, and did, against all odds, in the middle of everything, something she had never once managed in twenty-six years of living an hour from this water.

She rested.

It crept up on her. The first morning she sat in the bow rigid with all of it — Khaled's legs, Roeg's *price,* the box that rang, the thing Hagg Yusuf had named her, the terror that she was glad to be wanted — and she watched the banks go by, the impossible green strip of life pressed thin against the desert on both sides, the date palms and the buffalo standing in the shallows and the children waving from the mud villages and the herons lifting off the water ahead of the boat in slow white astonishment, and somewhere around noon, without deciding to,

she stopped gripping the gunwale.

The river did that to you. The river had been doing that to people for ten thousand years.

"You've gone quiet," said Ben, from the stern, where he had been pretending to study the gold disc for an hour and had mostly been watching her not grip the gunwale. "I've decided I don't trust you quiet. Quiet is when you decide things."

"I'm allowed to decide things. I'm cosmically important now. Hagg Yusuf said so." She didn't turn around. She was smiling, though, and she could hear that he could hear it. "I outrank you. You're just the man with the ruler."

"I prefer 'metrologist.' "

"You prefer 'prophet.' I've seen the chyron."

He made a sound that was almost a laugh, the wounded kind, and she did turn around then, because she was learning the difference between the things she could tease him about and the one she shouldn't, and the chyron was so close to the line, and she was sorry. He was sitting against the stern with his sleeves rolled and the disc in his hands and the river light coming up green-gold off the water onto the underside of his hard tired face, and he looked, for once, not like a famous man and not like a crank, just like a man on a boat, and something in her chest did a small unhelpful thing that she chose, for the moment, not to measure.

"Tell me about being four," he said.

She blinked. "What?"

"Aubert." He turned the disc over. "The Order had a file. Thin one — he kept it thin on purpose, I think, to protect you. Aubert was an archaeologist, French, kind, apparently. He was on a dig near here when you were small. Your father worked the dig — labour, I think. And something happened, when you were four, that Aubert saw, and that he spent the rest of his life keeping quiet, and that's how the Order knew

to look for *a woman in Cairo,* twenty-two years later, when the stone in the museum —" He stopped. "He died last year, by the way. Aubert. I'm sorry. I don't know if you—"

"I remember the apricots," she said.

It came up out of nowhere, the way the true things did. She sat down in the bottom of the boat with the river going by and she remembered, for the first time in years, properly: the long shade of the supply tent, the kind Frenchman who saved her the dried apricots, the boredom of the grown-ups arguing, and the light — the low red desert light coming through the gap in the tent flap and lying across the sand like something spilled — and how she had reached out one finger and—

"I used to play with the light," she said slowly. "When I was small. I'd forgotten. I'd completely — Ben, I think I *bent the light.* Not the stone. The actual light. I'd curl it round my finger like — like a thread of wool, and it would come, and then I'd let it go and it would snap back straight, and I thought that was so funny, that it wanted to be straight when bending was nicer, and I thought —" Her throat closed. "I thought everyone could. I thought it was a thing everyone could do and just didn't bother. And then one day Dr. Aubert came into the tent and his face was strange and his hand was shaking when he gave me the apricot, and I didn't understand why, and I never — after that I never did it again, I don't know why, I just — stopped. I forgot I could. For twenty-two years I forgot I could *bend light.*" She looked up at him, stricken. "Ben, what *am* I?"

And Ben van Kerk — who could have reached for a word, *resonance, coupling, the operator-principle,* who could have built her a careful scaffold of theory to stand on — looked at the woman who had bent light at four and rung a mountain at twenty-six, and put the disc down, and did the harder thing.

"I don't know," he said.

She stared at him.

"I genuinely don't know," he said again, and there was something

like wonder in it, and something like fear, and something like relief at being, for once, allowed not to perform certainty. "And I'll tell you what I've never told anyone, on any podcast, in any hotel room: that's the best part. That's the part I actually love, under all the noise. Not the answers. The part where you stand in front of a thing the whole world thinks it understands and you realise *nobody actually knows,* that there's a hole in the bottom of the story big enough to fall through, and on the other side of it is — you. A girl who bends light and doesn't know why." He shook his head slowly. "Hagg Yusuf's right not to let me name you. I'd ruin it. I'd cut you down to a tolerance and call it solved, because that's what I do when I'm frightened, I reach for a number, and you're not a number. You're the hole in the bottom of the story. And I've spent ten years looking for the hole in the bottom of the story, and now it's sitting in a boat eating my dates—"

"They're not your dates, the boatman gave them to *me*—"

"—eating *the boatman's* dates, and teasing me about the chyron, and I think—" He stopped. He had talked himself somewhere he hadn't meant to go, the way he did, and she watched him decide whether to keep going, and watched him not, quite, and the not-quite was its own small loud thing in the green-gold light. "I think it's the most interesting I've ever been allowed to be wrong about anything," he finished, lamely, and looked at the river, and the tips of his ears went red, and Layla looked at the tips of his ears going red and felt the countermelody come up warm and stubborn under everything, the chase and the terror and Khaled's legs and Roeg's *price,* and thought: *oh. Oh, no. Not him. Anyone but the man with the ruler.*

And, immediately after: *him.*

That night they tied up against a sandbar with the desert enormous and black on both sides and the stars coming down to the water, and Tarek and Dalia argued about football, and Jakobus sat in the bow with his sunglasses off in the dark and watched the river the way he watched everything, and Hagg Yusuf, whose face had been grey with

grief since the tunnel, since Khaled, sat with his back against the mast and let Layla bring him tea.

At dusk, when they'd tied up, Jakobus had done a thing that made Tarek laugh for the first time in days: he'd stripped to nothing and walked straight down the sandbar into the black river and stood waist-deep with his arms out, grinning up at the first stars like a much younger and much stupider man. "He does it every water," Dalia told Layla, not bothering to lower her voice. "Every river, every sea. Naked, always. First thing. He told me once it was a *vow*." She snorted. "A vow. The man swims like a brick with opinions. Look at him — that is not swimming, that is a drowning that has not committed yet." And it was true; he stayed where his feet could find the bottom, splashing more than stroking, graceless and enormous and delighted, and when Tarek shouted something across the water — a dare, *go deeper, go on, ya khawaga* — Jakobus had laughed and shaken his head and waded back toward the shallows.

"No," he'd called back, easy. "I get into every water I meet. I don't go *out* in it. Out is where the big fish are, and being eaten by a fish is the single most stupid way a person can die. Undignified. Avoidable. Generations of men did clever, brave, terrible things so that I could *not* be lunch, and I'm not going to waste it." He'd come up the sand dripping and unbothered and pulled his trousers back on. "Drown if you like. I'm going to die of something I chose."

Now he sat dry in the bow, and Layla noticed he hadn't lain down with the others, and that he wasn't going to. "You don't sleep," she said, bringing the tea.

"Not on a full moon." He took the cup and nodded up at it, fat and white and laying a road of cold light across the black water. "Somebody should be awake on a bright night anyway." He drank, and left it there.

"He'll walk again," the old man said, before she could ask. "Khaled. They set the legs in Cairo, Dalia heard. He'll walk. He'll keep the place from a chair for a while, and his son will help, and it will be all right." He took the tea. His hands shook, just slightly, the way Aubert's had.

"I have kept the wonders of Egypt my whole life, ya bint, and I have always told myself that keeping is enough, that we wait and we guard and we do not wake the sleeping things, because waking them is not ours to do." He looked at her, and the grief in his face had something underneath it now, something he had clearly been wrestling with on the long green river. "And then you came, and the boxes rang, and a good man's legs are broken, and I find I no longer know if I am keeping the wonder *safe* or only keeping it *asleep* because I am afraid of what it wakes." He pressed her hand. "I do not have the answer for you. I am old, and I thought I had all the answers, and you have shown me I have none of the important ones. So I will tell you the only true thing I have left." He smiled, exhausted, fond. "Whatever you choose, at the end of this river — and it is *yours* to choose, do not let any of us, not the rich man and not the engineer who looks at you like that and not this foolish old keeper, tell you otherwise — choose it *awake*. Not asleep, not frightened, not because someone wanted it. Awake, and on your own two feet, the way your ancestors hauled the granite. That is the difference between a key and a person. A key is turned. A person *chooses to turn*."

Later, when the old man slept and the football argument had burned down to embers and the river had gone to black glass, Layla took a cup of tea up to the bow, to Jakobus, who had not moved in an hour.

"If they come," she said, sitting. "On the water. Shouldn't I have a gun?"

He didn't answer for a while. His sunglasses were off, the way they only were in the dark, and his eyes in the last of the firelight were a colour she couldn't name and had stopped trying to.

"No," he said.

"You have one."

"I don't, actually."

Layla frowned. Ben, who would have bet the disc in his bag that the man was carrying, frowned too.

"A gun," Jakobus said, "gives you a feeling. The feeling is that you have power. The feeling is a lie — it's the most expensive lie there is, because you believe it right up until the half-second it gets you killed." He turned the empty tea glass in his fingers. "And it's dead weight at a border. You cannot walk up to a frightened boy at a checkpoint with your hands open and your eyes open and nothing to hide if there's a Tokarev in the door panel. The gun is the thing that turns a wave-through into a search. I'd rather have the wave-through. Every single time."

"But if there was a fight," Layla pressed. "A real one. Guns and everything."

"Then I'd take one." He said it without any heat at all, which was the thing about Jakobus, the thing Ben had stopped finding charming and started finding genuinely unsettling: the worse the content, the flatter the delivery. "There's always a gun in the room already, Layla. It's on the nearest man who doesn't know what he's doing — and in a fight, that's most of them. I'd take his. At the moment I needed it. And he would not have expected that, because he was relying on the feeling." He set the glass down. "Carry the feeling and you fight like a man who has power. Carry nothing and you fight like a man who knows he doesn't. The second man wins. Go to sleep."

He didn't, though. Not yet. He sat with the empty glass and the black water, and something moved behind the bare eyes that Ben, watching, would not have a name for until much later and never the whole of.

"My father put a handgun in my hands when I was too small for it," Jakobus said, to the river, not to either of them, "and braced me from behind, and when the thing kicked to break my face his hands were already there — caught the gun and my hands both, before I'd understood it had teeth." A pause; the glass turned once in his fingers. "The kick's the truth of it. The bang's the lie. It was never *power* — just a tool that bites the hand that thinks it's safe." He set the glass down on the deck, dead-square. "He got a lot of things wrong, my father. That one he got right, with his hands over mine."

It was the firelight on his bare inner forearm — on the long flowing line of **Arabic** there, the beautiful one, not the dismissible little Africa-outline on the other arm — that made her ask. She could read it; she had read Arabic before she had read English. And what she read was not a verse and not a name.

"*Fear is the killer of the mind,*" she read, slow, her finger hovering a careful inch above his skin, the Order's gesture, near a thing you respect and never on. "*Let it pass through me and over me, and turn and look at the road it took, and there will be nothing there. Nothing but me.*" She looked up. "That's not the Qur'an. Who wrote that?"

Ben, across the dying fire, made a small sound — the helpless reflex of a man who has read the same paperback to pieces. "It's the Litany," he said. "Against Fear. *Dune.*"

"It's *Dune,*" Jakobus agreed — and did not, for once, close the subject, because a man does not get coy about the words he wears on his own skin. "The one fear I can't out-think or out-wait. You've both felt the edge of it on the road — the walls coming in, *can't go.* So I put the words where I'd have to look at them." He turned the forearm a degree, the script catching the last of the fire. "The meaning's Herbert's. The hand that put it on me is the desert's — their tongue, not mine — and it's owed. Two true things in one tattoo, and I keep them the same way: on me, where I can't set them down." And that was as much of it as the night got; the *who* and the *where* of the desert hand he left in the dark, the way he left everything that mattered.

Ben said nothing, because there was nothing to say, and because he had the cold sense of a man who has walked out onto what he took for a floor and felt it flex over a great depth. Layla had gone still too. Whatever that had been, it had not been a war story. It had been the opposite of one.

Layla looked at him a long moment, and then she did the thing she did, the disarming thing, and grinned. "You are a very frightening person, Jakobus."

"I'm a very *careful* person," he said. "It looks the same from the outside." And he put the sunglasses back on, in the dark, which Ben had learned meant the conversation was over.

The next morning they tied up at a mud village where the green strip was already giving up and the sand was starting to win, and Layla got out to stretch and stood looking at Jakobus across the gunwale with her arms folded.

"So no gun," she said.

"No gun."

"But you have —" She stopped, counting, the engineer's habit. "That." She nodded at his thigh, where the **kukri** rode in its sheath. "And a Leatherman I've seen you do three jobs with at once. And —" she had been watching his pockets for days, the way she watched everything now "— two folding knives, one for nails and one for apples. A little titanium pry-bar the size of my finger. A pen that's machined out of a solid bar of aluminium with a tungsten tip on the end that I'm fairly sure isn't for writing. A folding saw that I watched you cut a tent-pole splint with. Trauma shears. A *pipe wrench,* Jakobus, the size of a lipstick. That's a small armoury."

She did not mention the nail clippers, which were titanium, and folded, and which she'd seen him use twice, unhurried, at a fuel stop and a fire — because the one thing his hands were never allowed to be was *dirty*. The clothes could be three days filthy; the boots could be the colour of the road. But the nails were clean, always, clipped square, the hands of a man whose mother had told him once, and exactly once, that a woman will forgive a man any amount of grime on his shirt and not one speck of it under his fingernails — that the clothes are the weather and the hands are the *man* — and that he had carried the lesson, like he carried everything that worked, for forty years without comment.

Ben, passing a water skin to Tarek, looked up. He'd noticed the big

knife — everyone noticed the big knife. He hadn't counted the rest, and the rest was the point.

Jakobus sat on the gunwale with his coffee and did not look defensive, because he wasn't. "Different things," he said. "A gun at a border is an announcement. It says *I might use this.* It turns a frightened boy with a stamp into a search. A knife on a bush belt, in most of Africa, says *I live here.* It's been saying that for a long time."

He nodded along the bank, to where the last light still lay on the fields.

A *fellah* was working the edge of a barley strip in the cool of the evening — an old man, unhurried, bent to the standing crop with a **minjal,** the short curved harvest sickle that had not changed its shape in five thousand years, and his arm went and the wheat fell and his arm went and the wheat fell, the blade an extension of him, swung so far past thought that he was looking the other way, at the river, while he did it.

"That," Jakobus said quietly, so only they heard, "is the oldest dangerous thing in the world, and he doesn't know it's dangerous, because to him it's just the evening's work. Watch the wrist. Ten thousand harvests in that wrist. The blade does what he doesn't have to think about anymore."

"In Egypt a blade is a tool," he said, "older than the writing. And here's the thing that's *under your feet,* under all of it — the *khopesh.* The sword the pharaohs are carved holding, the one curved like —" he tipped his chin at the old man in the field "— that. Like a sickle. Because it *was* a sickle. A harvest blade. Somebody who'd swung one at barley his whole life swung it at the wrong man one bad afternoon, and three thousand years later it's cut into every temple wall as the weapon of kings." A pause. "No secret art in it. Just a tool, and a hand that had used it since childhood until it was an extension of the body and not a thought — met by the wrong person at the wrong time. And then a legend gets born, and everyone forgets it started in a field. *That* field. This one. You're floating past where the first one happened."

Ben turned that over. “So the dangerous thing was never the blade.”

“The dangerous thing,” Jakobus said, “is ten thousand hours. The blade’s just what happened to be in the hand.” He straightened, empty cup in hand. “I carry knives because I use them every day. Wire, rope, fruit, nail, wood. The big one is for when the job is bigger than a pocket. None of them turn a checkpoint into a war. That’s the gun’s job.”

And Layla, who had been listening with the part of her that fitted things to their forms, looked at the curved blade on his thigh — the kukri, the recurved Nepali blade that any tourist read as a Rambo prop — and understood she had just been told what it was without his ever pointing at it. Another harvest shape. Another farmer’s tool that a hill people had carried up out of their fields and into legend, until soldiers a world away learned to be afraid of the *word* before they ever met the edge. He had not bought a weapon to look dangerous. He had bought the oldest argument he believed in, and worn it where everyone could dismiss it.

Out in the field the old man straightened, pressed a fist into the small of his back, and bent again to the barley, the minjal going on without him, swinging easy in a wrist that had forgotten it was holding anything at all.

Layla was quiet a moment. “You give a lecture like that and then tell us to go to sleep.”

“I give a lecture like that,” Jakobus said, “and then we sail.” But he didn’t stand. He looked at her for a second with his head a little on one side, the way he looked at a checkpoint he was deciding how to read, and then he said, “No. You don’t believe me. You think a gun would make you safe. Everyone does, until somebody shows them. *Tarek*.” He held a hand out without turning. “Lend me the cannon a minute.”

Tarek, who had been pretending not to listen and doing it badly, hesitated, then reached under the folded tarp at the stern and came up with it — the thing Layla had clocked on the first day and said nothing about, the absurd slab of a pistol he kept for a courage he would never

need: a **Desert Eagle**, .45, chromed, heavy as a brick and twice as stupid, the gun a man buys when the feeling is the whole point.

Jakobus took it the way you take a thing you have a lot of respect for and no affection at all. And then he did the boring part, slowly, narrating it, because the boring part was half the lesson: dropped the magazine into his palm and showed it to her, thumbed every fat brass round out of it one by one onto the deck where she could count them, locked the slide back and turned the empty gun so she could see clear through the breech and out the barrel, daylight where a round would be. Racked it twice more anyway. Checked the chamber again. *Empty. Empty. Empty.*

"It's safe," he said. "You watched me make it safe. You'll watch me check it twice more before we're done, because the rule is you never trust the last man who handled it, and right now the last man is me." He pressed it into her hands, closed her fingers around the grip. It was enormously heavier than she'd expected, a dead cold weight that wanted to pull her wrist down. "Now. I'm going to ask you to do a thing you must *never* do, with any gun, ever, loaded or not — and the reason it's a rule is the exact thing I'm about to teach you. Point it at me."

"Jakobus—"

"It's empty. You counted. Point it at me. Both hands, like the films taught you. Arms out. Cover me." He stepped back to the width of the little boat, three metres, maybe less, and stood there easy with his hands loose at his sides, a soft-bellied middle-aged man squinting at her over a chromed hand-cannon she was holding in a white-knuckled two-handed grip. "Good. Now you have all the power. Look at you. You could end me from there before I crossed half the distance. Everyone knows that. It's in every film. The man with the gun wins." A beat, mild. "So win."

She didn't see him pick up the stone. Nobody ever did; that was the whole art of it; the hand that mattered was never the hand you were watching. He was talking — *the gun's pointed at me, you've got the drop, what could possibly* — and his weight was a fraction off and his

eyes flicked, just once, past her left shoulder to the reeds, and some animal older than thought turned her head a few degrees to see what was there—

—and the stone landed in the brush behind her with a clatter and her head snapped fully around toward it, half a second, less—

—and then Jakobus was *in front of her,* close, inside the gun, and it was already over.

She had not felt him cross the distance. She would replay it for the rest of the relay and never find the frame where he moved. One hand had hers and the barrel, folded up and away off his body and turned back over her own wrist before her brain had even finished reporting the noise in the reeds — *the line of fire first,* she'd understand later, *always the muzzle off the body first, the gun second* — and his other hand had tapped the grip, two fingers, almost gentle, and the heavy thing had come up off her palm and turned over once in the air on its own axis, lazy, and dropped into his waiting hand like a tool returning to the man it belonged to.

He let it sit there a second. The Nile went by. Tarek had stopped breathing.

Then something *clicked* — small, mechanical, final — and she flinched at it before she knew what it was.

"You left the safety on," Jakobus said.

He turned the pistol so she could see his thumb on the little lever, where he had just thumbed it *down* into the firing position — the lever that had been *up,* engaged, the whole time. The whole time she'd had the drop on him. The whole time she'd held all the power in two trembling hands and known, the way the films had taught her to know, that the man with the gun wins.

"It wouldn't have fired," he said, quiet, no triumph in it at all, which was worse. "Not once. You were holding a brick. You didn't know your own weapon, and you wouldn't have found the safety in the half-second

you had, and you wouldn't have had the half-second, because the gun told you you were safe and you *stopped paying attention*. That's all it does, Layla. That's the entire gift of it. It doesn't make you dangerous. It makes you feel dangerous, which is the most dangerous thing a person can feel, because the feeling is where you live instead of the room." He dropped the magazine back out, cleared it once more from pure habit, and handed the empty gun back to Tarek butt-first without looking. "Be in the room. You have to *grok* the room. Guns take you out of it."

"You have to *what* the room," Ben said.

But Jakobus had already turned back to the water, the conversation closed behind him the way they always closed, and the word just sat there, used and unexplained, as if everyone on the boat had been issued the same dictionary at birth and Ben had lost his.

Layla stood with her empty hands still half-curled around a weight that wasn't there, her heart going like something trying to get out, and did not say anything for a while.

It was the most frightened he had ever made her, and he had done it without raising his voice or his hand, and she understood, finally and in her body and not just her ears, the thing he had been trying to give her on the riverbank: that he had not been being modest about the gun. He had been being *kind*.

They were back on the felucca by noon, and the second night found them tied up again with the desert pouring past on either side and the stars coming all the way down to the water.

The cold came on fast once the sun let go, the way it did out here, and Layla — wrapped in a borrowed blanket by the small fire Dalia had coaxed up in a steel dish on the sand — watched Jakobus do something she didn't understand at first. He'd taken the woven band off his wrist. He was unpicking it. One knot, worked loose with a thumbnail, and then the whole flat braid simply *came undone* in his hands, paying out longer and longer, half a metre, a metre, then more, far more cord

than a bracelet had any business containing, until what had been an ornament was two metres of dun-coloured rope coiled in his lap like a snake he'd charmed out of a basket. It was the smallest, neatest magic trick she had ever seen, and he did it without looking, the way other men crack their knuckles.

"What *is* that," she said.

"Paracord. Parachute line." He found the two ends, each sealed in a hard little bead of melted nylon, and flicked open a tiny scissor from the folding multitool — the MacGyver thing, Tarek called it, with reverence — and snipped the scorched ends clean. "Looks like a bracelet so nobody asks about it. It's two metres of the most useful thing you can carry and not have anyone notice you're carrying it — and more inside that, if you count the strands." He peeled back the outer sheath, and inside were the strands, seven or eight of them, thin and white and tightly spun. He felt her lean in, and without being asked he teased one free and held it up. This one was different — red, and waxy, and thicker than the rest, and it left a faint resinous shine on his fingers.

"Firestarter," he said, flat, and handed it to her. It was greasy and stiff between her fingers, and it smelled, faintly, of the thing on his wrist. "Comes built into the cord — milspec stuff, you buy it by the metre, one waxed strand down the middle that catches off a spark. People make out it's some bushcraft secret. It isn't. I found the right cord and I buy the right cord, that's the whole trick." He turned his wrist a degree so she saw where the bracelet had been. "That smell's just my perfume; the cord lives on my arm, it picks it up. The wax does the work, not me. With practice you coil it tight and it'll burn ten minutes off a thumb-length — long enough to dry tinder that's got no business catching. Or a stove low enough that nobody sees the light, to warm a tin of bully-beef when a real fire would get you killed." He nodded at the lighter on the sand by her knee. "Go on."

She struck it to the red strand and it caught with a small fierce hiss and a steady amber flame, far stronger than a thread that thin should give, and she made a sound she was slightly embarrassed by. Jakobus

had already gone back to the cord. His hands moved without his eyes, the way they did everything — he drew off two of the white strands and rolled them between his palms into a tidy little spool. "Fishing line." Another. "Snare-line — set it right, it feeds you while you sleep." He weighed the gutted sheath in his hand a moment, and something in his face went very slightly elsewhere, and he said, in exactly the same flat tone, "Braid the outer back up three-strand and it'll hold a man's weight. Or take it round his throat. In a bad enough corner it's a garotte. You hope you never find that corner." He said it the way he'd said *firestarter,* no weight on it at all, which was somehow the most chilling part — that it sat in the same drawer in him as the fishing line, a tool among tools, filed by use and not by horror. Then he was knotting it all back up, fast, the braid re-forming under his fingers into the innocent little band, and the moment closed like a hand.

She watched him work and thought about the big knife everyone was meant to notice and the cord nobody was, and she said, before she'd decided to, "I thought you were —" She stopped.

"Playing dress-up." He didn't look up from the braid. "Ja. You're meant to." A knot pulled tight. "A man with a wall of kit who *needs* you to see it — that's a soft man borrowing a shape. People clock it in a second and stop worrying about him. The trick is to be that man on the outside." He tied off the last knot and slid the rebuilt bracelet back over his wrist. "And to have spent forty years making sure every single thing on you is there because it *works,* not because it looks like it works. Nobody searches the man who's trying too hard. They've already decided what he is."

The fire ticked. The firestarter strand had burned down to nothing in her fingers and left only the smell, and she lifted her hand and breathed it, the green-and-resin thing she'd called citronella in a moving car a lifetime ago, and asked the question she'd been saving.

"Why this smell. Really."

He was quiet long enough that she thought he wouldn't answer, and then he did, and it was the most she would ever hear him say about

himself in one sitting, and he said it to the fire and not to her, which was the only way he could.

"First time I went into the Great Pyramid I was a younger man and I thought I knew what I'd feel. Nothing, probably. Tourist thing, queue and a torch and a low passage and an empty stone room, everybody's told you it's a let-down." He turned the bracelet on his wrist. "And then I was in it. Up the gallery, in the dark, in the *weight* of it, and there was a smell — old stone and dust and other people's breath and a thousand burned-out lamps — and something in me just — sat down. Stopped arguing." A small movement of his head. "Same trip I put my hand flat on the side of the unfinished obelisk down at Aswan. Biggest one anyone ever tried to cut, still lying there in the bedrock where it cracked, and you can put your whole hand in the marks their tools left. Not behind glass. Not roped off. *Their hands, and then yours.* And the hieroglyphs you could actually touch, run your thumb along a thing a man carved before anyone you've ever heard of was born. And there was good coffee, and people who took me in and fed me and laughed at me, warm as anything, and on a wall this old somebody had carved —" the corner of his mouth moved " — a thing you would not put on a postcard. Anatomy. Cheerfully, enormously specific. A sperm cell, blown up huge, dead accurate, in front of exactly what you'd think, five thousand years before anyone had a lens to see one with."

He picked up a twig and turned it in the fire.

"And I stood there and something clicked into place that has never come loose since. Every white professor I'd ever half-listened to telling me these were primitives who got lucky with rocks — every documentary that needed it to be aliens or a lost race or anybody, *anybody* but the people whose grandchildren were pouring my coffee — all of it just fell off me, in one go, in front of that wall. These were *people*. Cleverer than me. Funnier than me. They knew things we don't anymore." He pushed the twig into the coals. "I couldn't carry the Pyramid home in my pocket. So I carry the smell." He glanced at her, once, and the shades were off and his eyes were doing the thing they did. "Your gold. Hagg Yusuf's boxes. I knew before either of you told me. I *grokked* it

the first morning. I've smelled it every day for twenty years."

Ben opened his mouth — *there it was again, that word, the one the man dropped like loose change and never picked up* — and shut it, because some questions you save, and a man who has just handed you his whole heart wrapped in a smell is not a man you stop to ask for a definition.

Nobody said anything for a moment. Tarek, who had drifted over somewhere in the middle of it, was sitting very still.

"It's not citronella," Layla said softly.

"No," said Jakobus. "It never was." He turned the rebuilt band once on his wrist, settling it, and looked back at the fire — done now, the shutter eased back down over the part of him he'd let the dark see — and she understood she'd been given the whole of it, and that there would be no more tonight, and she let him have the quiet.

But she had not gone to sleep on the gun question either, and she carried it into the rest of the night the way she carried everything now — openly — and after a while, when she brought him a fresh tea at the bow, she tried the next one, because she was learning he would give you one true thing if you didn't grab for two. "You've done this before. All of it. The moving-people, the borders."

"Mm."

"Where?"

A pause, long enough that she looked at him. "All over."

"Anywhere beautiful?" She was thinking of the green strip sliding by all day, the herons. "When this is over I want to *see* things. The whole continent. I've lived an hour from this river my whole life and never sailed it."

"Then you should." Something had gone quiet in him that was different from his usual quiet, there and gone, and he did not chase it — only let her see, for half a second, that there was a *there* there, a thing

about going and not-going that he was not going to open tonight. He took his glasses off for every soldier and every boy at every boom between Cairo and here, she'd noticed, the way a man does who has spent some part of his life on the wrong side of every door and knows exactly what it costs to be the one they don't wave through. She filed it with the rest. There would be a night for it, and this was not the night. She left him the tea and went back to the embers.

Layla lay down by the dying fire by the river that had made everyone rest for ten thousand years, and thought about light snapping back to straight, and thought about how badly it had wanted to be straight, and how she had always thought that was the funny part.

She wasn't sure anymore that it was funny.

She thought, maybe, it was the bravest thing the light did. To bend when something asked, and then to *choose,* every single time, to go back to being itself.

Upriver, in the dark, the gold disc lay in Ben's bag with its shallow vector pointing south and a little east, warm because she was near, toward the granite quarry at Aswan where the makers' hand still lay frozen on a stone they had broken and walked away from — and beyond it, far to the north, toward the cold cobalt dark of the sea, where the last note of the instrument waited, drowned by design, for a girl who was learning, slowly, on a slow river, the difference between being turned and choosing to turn.

Chapter 12 — The Broken Blank

Aswan hit Ben in the eyes after the green river the way a flashbulb hits you in the dark, because the river was over and the quarry was *ochre,* raw red-gold granite under a noon sun that came down like a hammer, the colour turned all the way back up after Saqqara's dark and the river's green, the whole ancient quarry blazing, and lying in the middle of it, still attached to the bedrock it had never been cut free of, was the largest single piece of stone any human being had ever attempted to make.

The unfinished obelisk.

"*Jirre,*" said Ben, which was the only prayer he had, and walked out into the heat toward it with the disc burning in his bag and his whole body humming, because this — *this* — was the one he'd wanted to stand on his whole life, the one even the cautious archaeologists couldn't fully explain, the work caught mid-act, the makers' hand frozen on the stone.

The heat was a physical thing. It came up off the granite as much as down from the sky, so that the air over the trenches shimmered and the far quarry walls swam, and the few tourists who'd come out at noon had given up and retreated to the shade of the visitor shelter, leaving the great stone to the two of them and the merciless light. A guard in a folding chair lifted two fingers at Layla, who lifted two back without

thinking — *of this place, from the inside* — and the guard let them be. Ben's shirt was soaked through before he reached the rope.

It was enormous beyond photography, the way they all were. Had it been finished and raised it would have stood forty-two metres and weighed eleven hundred tonnes — a single piece of granite heavier than three jumbo jets, heavier than anything the human species had moved before the industrial age and most things since — and it lay there in its trench, three-quarters separated from the living rock, abandoned, because somewhere in the cutting a flaw in the granite had opened into a crack, and whoever was making it had looked at the crack and walked away and left it for five thousand years.

"Okay," Ben breathed. "Khaled showed me the boxes. Let me show you the *tooling*."

He took her down into the trench.

The trench was the thing. The trench was always the thing nobody talked about. Because the story — the official story, the one in the books, the one the academy defended like a fortress — said the ancient Egyptians separated this thousand-tonne block from the bedrock by hand, with balls of dolerite, a harder stone, pounding the granite to powder, a little at a time, men in lines bashing rock with rock for years. And Ben had always said *maybe,* because *maybe* was honest, but standing in the trench he ran his hand down the wall of it and felt the thing the books couldn't account for and his skin went cold in the heat.

"Look at the trench," he said. "The shape of it. The *scoops*."

The walls of the trench were not flat, not roughly bashed. They were cut in a series of smooth concave scoops, vertical channels, each one the width of a — Ben held his hands up, measuring — each one the width of a large bowl, scooped down through solid granite in long clean vertical strokes, one beside the next beside the next, like the marks a melon-baller leaves, like the marks a *machine* leaves, and at the bottom of the trench, in the narrow gap where the block was nearly

free, the scoops went on, smooth and regular and *fast-looking,* nothing like the slow random cratering you'd get from a million hammer-blows.

He crouched and got the steel rule out of his bag, the little folding one, and laid it across two of the scoops, and read the spacing, and read it again, because the first reading had been a number that didn't want to be true. He looked up at her.

"They're *regular,*" he said. "Layla. Look. This scoop, and this one, and this one — the centres are evenly spaced. To a couple of millimetres. Down through the hardest stone there is, in long vertical bites, *evenly spaced*. You don't get regular spacing from men with rocks. You get regular spacing from a *process*. From a machine, or a method so repeatable it might as well be one." He folded the rule shut. His hands weren't quite steady, and it wasn't the heat.

"You don't get this from pounding," Ben said, standing, and his voice had gone quiet again, the lecture burning off. "I've watched them try. Good experiments. Honest archaeologists, dolerite balls on granite for hours, clocking how fast it goes. And it works, *ja,* sort of. Takes the granite down. Slowly. Leaves a *mess*." He ran his palm down a scoop, the concave granite warm and smooth and regular under his hand. "It does not leave *this*. This is fast and it's *controlled*. Each scoop's a clean stroke. Somebody — *something* — came down through the hardest stone there is in long smooth bites, like cutting a melon, like the granite was —" he stopped, because the word was *soft,* and that was insane, and he said it anyway, because the trench wall said it for him " — like it was *soft*. And we don't know how. *Fok*." He spread his hands at the blazing impossible ochre walls. "It's a hole in the bottom of the story. Same as—" and he caught himself, looked at her, and didn't finish it the easy way. "Same as the thing you do that I still can't read."

"You always finish with something like that," Layla said, but there was no edge on it. She had her hand flat on a scoop. She had gone still, the way she went still now, and the stillness had texture to it, a listening, and Ben had learned to shut up when she did this.

"It's not ringing," she said, frowning. "Ben. The boxes rang. The mountain rang. This — it's the biggest stone in the world and it's s*ilent*. Why is it silent?"

And that, Ben realised slowly, was the actual question. That was the clue. He'd been so busy with the *how* of the cutting he'd missed the *why* of the silence, and now he stood in the trench beside her and made himself think it through, out loud, the way he thought best, his hand still on the warm scooped granite as if the stone might prompt him.

"Because it's not finished," he said slowly. "No. More than that. Because — Layla, what *i*s an obelisk? Forget what the books say it's for. The sun-god, the rays, all of it — that's the *inheritor* layer, that's what the dynastic Egyptians made of it, and it's beautiful. But it's not what it's *for*." He took a breath. He had spent his whole public life on this distinction and watched it get him called a crank, and he watched himself reach for it anyway. "Look at the *shape*. A long tapered shaft of granite, cut to a length, set upright, free-standing, anchored at one end." His heart had started to pound. "That's a *tine*. A tuning fork. That's exactly the shape you'd cut if you needed an enormous granite *resonator* — a free-standing tuned mass that rings at a pitch set by its length and its material. A *tuning-fork blank*. The boxes are the cavities. The chambers. And the obelisks are the *fork*s. The drivers. The things you strike to *sound* the system."

He turned to her, blazing now, brighter than the quarry. "And this one's silent because it *cracked*." He went up the trench wall to where the fracture ran, a hairline that widened, a flaw in the crystal that had opened under the cut and travelled, and he put two fingers in it the way you'd put a finger on a wound. "It cracked in the cutting — there, see it, running clean through the shaft — and a cracked tine won't ring true. A cracked fork is *dead*. Strike it and it thuds. So they—"

"—they scrapped it," Layla whispered. "They threw it away."

"They threw it away." Ben stood in the trench in the hammering noon light beside the most important person on Earth and felt the

whole thing turn over, the entire relay, every node, resolve into a single staggering shape. "Layla. Do you understand what this *is?* It's not a monument they failed to finish. It's a *factory floor.* This is the makers' *workshop* — where they were cutting the components — and this one *failed.* Cracked on the line. So they left it, the way you leave a casting that came out of the mould wrong. Every node we've seen — the boxes, the granite, all of it — they're *parts.* Manufactured parts of one machine, strung down the whole river and out under the sea. And here—" his voice cracked, the awe winning "—here's the one place the makers got it *wrong.* The one place they're *human.* They cut the most enormous tuning fork in the history of the universe, and the granite betrayed them, and even *they* — even the people who cut granite like it was soft — even they had to look at a broken thing and walk away and start again."

And Layla — standing in the makers' scrapyard, her hand on the failed fork, looking at the proof that the people who made her were not gods but *makers,* people who tried and failed and tried again — Layla did something Ben didn't expect. She laughed. Wet, astonished, and somehow the most relieved sound he'd heard her make. She pressed her free hand to her mouth and laughed into it, and her shoulders shook, and Ben stood there in the heat not knowing whether to reach for her, and then she took the hand away and he saw it was relief, real relief, the kind that comes out the eyes.

"They made mistakes," she said. "The makers. The ones everyone's so afraid of, the ones Roeg wants to *own* — they're not gods. They cracked the granite. They had to throw it away and start over. Like me with a tray when the metal goes wrong." She pressed her palm to the silent stone, and there were tears on her face, but they were good ones. "You've never watched me work. When the silver doesn't take — when the enamel pits, or the metal slumps wrong in the firing — you don't fight it. You can't. You scrape it back and start the tray again. And it isn't failure. It's just the *cost.* It's what the material asks of you." She wiped her face with the back of her wrist, leaving a smudge of ochre dust. She was quiet a second, looking at the crack, working it out as

she said it. "I've been so scared that I was a — a *part*. A component. The breath in the *ney*. And I am. But so was *this*, and *this* is the most human thing in Egypt, this broken beautiful thing they couldn't fix."

She looked at Ben, fierce and bright and unafraid in a way he hadn't seen yet, and the heat-shimmer made her seem to burn at the edges.

"If the makers could make a mistake and throw it away and *choose* to start again — then I get to choose too. The instrument needs me. Fine. But it cracked its own best fork. It doesn't get to tell me I'm not allowed to be a person who *chooses*. Even a part gets to choose." She turned back to the obelisk, blazing. "Where does it point now, Ben? The disc. Where's the last one?"

Ben got the disc out, into the hammering light, and held it up, and turned it. He'd done this a dozen times down the river and it had always given him a soft thing, a *shallow* vector, a maybe, a direction with a shrug in it. Now he turned it and felt it go warm under his thumb — properly warm, the way the basalt had gone for her in Cairo a lifetime ago — and the vector at its centre *resolved*. For the first time in the whole journey it resolved completely, locked, *finished*, a direction and a depth and, now that they were this close, this far down the relay, with Layla this near, a *clarity* that made his breath catch and his thumb go still on the cool gold.

"North," he said softly. "All the way north. Past Cairo, past everything, to the coast. To the sea off Alexandria." He tilted it, read the depth it gave up at last, and his stomach dropped, because it was deep, it was very deep, it was the floor of a drowned bay. "Abu Qir. The drowned temples. The last note." He lowered the disc and the warmth went out of it in his hand. "And, Layla—"

He hesitated, because here was the thing he'd worked out on the river in the blue dark while she slept against the cabin wall and not said, the thing that changed everything, the hard truth the whole quarry had been driving him toward.

"I had it wrong. The whole time. We *all* had it wrong about what the

instrument *does*."

She went still. "What do you mean."

"I thought — the Order thought, Roeg thinks — it's a *machine*. A power source. A weapon. A thing you switch *on,* that *does* something *to* the world." He shook his head slowly, looking at the silent broken fork, at the scoops, at the whole factory floor of it baking in the light. "That's what Roeg wants it to be. Because that's a thing you can *own*. A weapon you can hold. A patent you can file. But it's not a machine, Layla. Hagg Yusuf kept saying it and I kept hearing the wrong word. He'd say *instrument* and I'd hear *device,* because I'm an engineer and that's the only word I had. But he didn't mean a tool. He meant the other thing." He met her eyes. "It's an *instrument* the way a *ney* is an instrument. It doesn't *do* something to the world."

He spread his hands at the obelisk, at the trench, at the whole impossible ochre yard.

"It *says* something. It's not a weapon and it's not a battery. It's a — the biggest, oldest, most precise thing ever built, strung across a whole continent and drowned in the sea, tuned to optical perfection, waiting five thousand years for one person who can sound it. And when she does, it doesn't fire. It doesn't power anything. It doesn't *take*. It *speaks*. It says whatever the makers built it to say, across all that distance and all that time, to anyone listening." His voice dropped to almost nothing in the great silence of the quarry. He looked at her, the most important person on Earth, standing in the makers' scrapyard with her hand on their one beautiful failure. "And you're not the trigger. You're—" and he stopped, because the clean word was there and it was hers, not his to land. "Ag. You know what you are. It's not a switch."

The quarry blazed around them, ochre and gold and enormous and silent.

Layla didn't say anything for a long moment. She looked down at her own hand on the dead stone, the one that wouldn't ring, and then she looked north, the way the disc had pointed, toward a coast neither

of them could see and a sea that had swallowed the last note five thousand years before either of them was born. And whatever moved across her face then was not the fear that had ridden her the whole way down the river. It was something steadier. Something that had decided.

"Then we'd better go and listen," she said.

And from the lip of the trench, against the white sky, a figure in a sun hat lifted a long-lensed camera — a soft mechanical stutter lost entirely in the vastness of the quarry, a sound neither of them heard — and somewhere a phone was already dialling north, to a man in a linen suit who had been waiting, patiently, in a cool room above a cooler sea, to learn exactly this: that the instrument needed her *willing,* that it could not be forced, that it would only ever *speak* for a free voice. He took the news without surprise. He had suspected it for some time. And he was, even now, with the unhurried calm of a man who has never once been told no, beginning to assemble the one terrible argument he believed could make any voice, however free, say exactly what he wanted it to say.

Chapter 13 — The Cold Stone

They took Tarek at the Aswan quarry, in the white noon, in front of everyone, and the worst part — the part Layla would carry north with her like a stone of her own — was how *quiet* it was. No guns waved. No shouting. Just three men in tourist clothes and a fourth in a linen suit, walking up out of the heat-shimmer as though they had every right, while Jakobus's hand went to his hip and stopped, because one of the three men had a hand on the back of Tarek's neck and the boy's face was white and Roeg was smiling and there was nothing, in that bright crowded place, that anyone could do.

"Don't," said Caspian Roeg pleasantly, to Jakobus. "There are children's school groups forty metres away. Nobody wants that. I certainly don't — I'm not a monster, whatever you think." He looked, frankly delighted, at the broken obelisk in its trench. "God, it's even better in person, isn't it? The *scoops*. You were right about the scoops, Ben, I read the marks myself last week, the dolerite story is *nonsense*." He turned to Layla, and his face did the complicated thing again, the flicker of real feeling under the gloss, and that was the most frightening part of all, that he *meant* it. "Hello, Layla. I've worked out the currency."

"Let my brother go." Her voice came from very far away. Tarek's eyes found hers across the heat, nineteen and terrified and trying so hard not to be, and something in her chest tore clean across.

"Of course I will," said Roeg, and sounded hurt that she'd doubt it. "I told you, I'm not a thug. I don't *want* your brother. Tarek's a nice boy, he likes football, we had a lovely chat in the car." He spread his hands. "Here's how this works, and I want to be honest, because honesty is the only technique that's ever worked on this little group. You've all worked out the same thing I have. The instrument needs a voice, and the voice has to be *free* — it won't sound for a hand on its collar, your engineer's right, I've had people test the smaller resonances, you cannot *force* the coupling, a frightened operator doesn't ring." He said it lightly, technically, an engineer admiring a constraint. "Annoying, isn't it? From my point of view. The single most valuable thing on Earth, and it has a *consent requirement* built into the physics." He smiled. "So I'm not going to force you, Layla. I *can't,* and even if I could it wouldn't work, and I'm too good an engineer to fight the physics. What I'm going to do instead is much simpler." He nodded at Tarek. "I'm going to keep your brother. Comfortable. Safe. Well-fed, lots of football. And when we all get to the chamber under Abu Qir — and we will, I'll be right behind you, you'll read the way for me, you always do — you're going to walk down into that water and you're going to sound the instrument for me, *freely,* with a *whole, glad heart,* because that's the only way it works—" his smile widened, and the real thing under it showed through, the hunger, the certainty, the small frightened man who had decided long ago that everything has a price "—and the reason your heart will be glad and free is that you'll know that the moment you do, your brother gets to go home. That's not force, Layla. That's *motivation*. I'd never *force* you." He turned, gesturing his men back toward the vehicles, Tarek between them. "I'm just going to make sure that the freest, gladdest choice you could possibly make is the one I want. It's what I do. It's why I have everything." Over his shoulder, almost kind: "I'll see you at the sea. Don't be long. Tarek and I will be watching the football."

And they were gone, into the heat, before Jakobus could close the distance, before Ben could move, before Layla could breathe, and they took her brother with them.

She broke, after. Properly, for the first time, behind the visitor centre where the school groups couldn't see, with Ben's arms around her and Hagg Yusuf's hand on her hair and Dalia already on three phones at once, and she let it out, all of it, the terror and the rage and the unbearable trap of it, because Roeg had found the one currency that worked, the one thing she could not refuse to pay: her brother, against the whole world.

"He's right," she said, into Ben's shoulder, shaking. "That's the worst part. He's *right*. I'll do it. Of course I'll do it. He knows I'll walk into that water with a glad heart and ring his machine for him because the alternative is *Tarek,* and a glad heart for Tarek is still a *glad heart,* it'll still *work,* he's found a way to force me that isn't forcing, he's going to *own* me through the one door I can't lock—"

"No," said Ben.

He said it quietly, and he held her by the shoulders and made her look at him, and his hard tired face had something in it she hadn't seen before, the engineer fully awake, the man who had spent his life finding the flaw in the thing everyone else accepted.

"No," he said again. "Listen to me. He's wrong, and I can prove he's wrong, and it's the most important thing I'll ever measure, so *listen*." He took a breath. "Roeg thinks the only requirement is that you're not physically forced in the *moment*. That if your heart is glad — even glad because he's holding a knife to everything you love — the coupling works, because the meter reads *glad,* because you're not crying when you touch it. He thinks consent is a *state,* a reading he can engineer, a box he can tick by arranging your incentives." Ben shook his head slowly. "But that's not what consent *is,* Layla. And I think — I think the makers knew that. I think it's *in the physics*. I've been turning it over since the trench, and here's what I keep coming back to: the boxes rang for you when you *chose* to believe, in the museum, on the plateau, in the tunnel. Every single time, the coupling got *stronger* the more you *chose* it — not the calmer you were, the more you *decided*. It's

not measuring your mood, Layla. I don't think it's measuring whether you're *glad*." His grip tightened. "I think it's measuring whether you're *free*. Actually free. And a choice made because a man is holding your brother—" he held her eyes "—is not a free choice. It's the *opposite* of a free choice. It's the most coerced choice there is, dressed up as a glad one. And if I'm right — if the makers built it to need a *genuinely* free voice, not a *forced-into-gladness* one — then when you walk into that water and try to sound it *for him, to save Tarek,* with that knife at your back—"

"—it won't work," Layla breathed.

"It won't work." Ben let out a long breath. "The stone will go cold. Not because you're sad. Because you're not *free*. Roeg's going to stand in that chamber and watch the most valuable thing on Earth refuse to ring, and he's not going to understand why, because he's never once in his life understood the difference between a choice and a transaction, between *free* and *glad*." His jaw worked. "He thinks he's found the currency. But you can't *buy* free. The second there's a price, it isn't free anymore. That's not morality, Layla — that's the *mechanism*. It's built into the stone. The makers made an instrument that *cannot be owned,* because the only thing that sounds it is a voice that nobody owns, not even—" he hesitated "—not even me. Not even you-for-your-brother. *Free*. All the way free. Or it stays cold."

Layla stood behind the visitor centre in the hammering Aswan heat, her brother gone north into a billionaire's hands, and looked at the engineer who had just handed her, instead of false comfort, a *measurement* — a true one, a checkable one, a thing she could stake Tarek's life on because Ben van Kerk did not lie about tolerances, had never once lied about a tolerance, would sooner die than lie about a tolerance — and felt the trap, for the first time since they'd taken her brother, change shape.

It was still a trap. But now there was a flaw in it. A crack, running through the granite of it, like the one that had killed the great fork.

"Then I have to actually be free," she said slowly, working it out, the

whole terrible elegant shape of it. "When I get to the water. I can't walk in to *save Tarek*. Because that won't work — that's the cold stone, that's coerced, that's *bought*. The only way to save Tarek—" her voice shook, but it did not stop "—is to walk into that water and choose to sound the instrument *for a reason that has nothing to do with Roeg, and nothing to do with Tarek, and nothing to do with being made to*. A reason that's only mine. A free reason. *Then* it rings — and then it's not his, it never could have been his, and Roeg standing there watching it ring for a reason he can't buy is the one thing in the world that beats him." She looked up at Ben, and there were tears on her face, and under them something rising that felt like the first honest thing she'd ever said aloud. "I have to find out what *I* would sound it for. Not for him. Not even for Tarek. For — for *me*. Freely. And I don't know what that is yet." Her jaw set. "But I've got a whole sea between here and there to work it out."

"Ja," said Ben softly, and he was looking at her the way he'd looked at the air going gold, the way he'd looked at the meter pinning at sixteen hertz, the look of a man watching the most beautiful thing he'd ever been allowed to witness. "Ja, you do."

Hagg Yusuf, beside them, leaning on his stick, his grief and his fear and his love all in his old riverbed face, said quietly, "*That* is the difference between a key and a person, ya bint. I told you on the river. A key is turned." He pressed her shoulder. "You are going to teach the richest man in the world the thing the makers knew and he never will: that the only voice worth a wonder is one no one can own — and that the moment he tried to put a price on you, he made it certain you would never sound for him." He smiled, exhausted, fierce, proud. "Now. The sea is far. And your brother is waiting. Let us go and be free at him."

And Layla wiped her face, and squared her shoulders the way her ancestors had squared the corners of the granite whether anyone was watching or not, and turned north — toward Cairo, toward the coast, toward the cold cobalt dark where the last note waited and her brother was held and the whole thing would either ring or stay silent forever

— and went to find out, on a long road north, the one free reason that was only hers.

Roeg had the roads. That was the problem Jakobus laid out, flat, over a map, the second night: every fast route north had Roeg's watchers on it now, because Roeg wanted them to arrive — just *late,* and *herded,* and sure they had no choice but the chamber. So they would not take the roads. They would cut west, into the real desert, and buy a way north that wasn't on any map, from the only people who had one.

They had stopped at the edge of the green strip to wait for Dalia's cousin, the engine ticking down in the last of the shade, and Layla — who had been watching Jakobus the way she watched everything now, with the quiet hunger of someone learning what kind of world she lived in — pointed at the square of checked cloth hanging loose around his neck.

"That," she said. "The scarf. Is it just for the look? The desert-trooper thing?"

Jakobus looked down at it as if he'd forgotten it was there. Then he took it off and shook it out, and his hands moved without hurry — fold, tuck, wind — and what had been a bit of costume became, in twenty seconds, a head-wrap in a style Layla did not have a name for but recognised instantly as *belonging*, the way a dialect belongs.

"Not ornamental," he said. He adjusted the tail with two fingers, checked it in the side mirror without vanity. "In the desert there isn't one way to wrap a turban. There are a dozen. Each one says where you're from, who taught you, sometimes what you do for a living." He glanced at her in the mirror. "The colour of your skin tells them you're a foreigner in about two seconds. The fold tells them *what kind* of foreigner — the kind who learned, or the kind who bought a scarf at the airport." A beat. "I'd rather they spent the two seconds on the fold."

Ben, in the back, had been about to make a joke about Instagram

explorers. He did not make the joke.

Layla touched the edge of her own headscarf — the one she'd worn since she was a girl, the one that had nothing to do with tradecraft and everything to do with being herself in Cairo — and looked at Jakobus's hands, still steady on the wheel, and said, "Show me again."

He showed her. Slowly. Without making a lesson of it.

Dalia's cousin brought them out past the last green into the deep desert, the Sahara proper, where the sand stopped being scenery and became a fact with opinions, and at the gold hour they came up on a camp: low tents the colour of the ground, camels folded like deck chairs, and men. Robed men, indigo and dust-brown, the cloth wound across the face so that what you got was eyes and bearing, and the bearing was the thing. *Kel Tamasheq,* Dalia said quietly. *Tuareg. The free people. Be polite or be elsewhere.* They were the most magnificent and the most genuinely unbothered human beings Layla had ever seen, the way a mountain is unbothered by weather.

Jakobus stopped the vehicle a respectful way out, and sat a moment with his hands on the wheel. Then he turned around and looked at Layla and did a thing she had not once seen him do: he struggled.

"Layla. I need you to stay in the car for this one."

The silence was instant. Because this was the man who had handed her the disc, who deferred to Dalia on the route and to her on the stone, who had told a billionaire to his face that she was a person and not a thing to be turned. And now he was asking her to sit in a car.

"You're joking."

"I'm not. I hate it." It was all over the part of his face the shades didn't cover. "This is their country and their custom and not mine to fix. Strangers meeting out here — the men sit, they take tea, they ask after each other's people, and they get to *why are you in my desert* slowly, in an order older than any of us. If I walk you to that fire I insult them in their own home, and they have the route and the water and the

holes in Roeg's net, and I have a vehicle and a debt and my manners." He held her eyes; he didn't look away from it. "I am not telling you you can't. I'm telling you *they* won't, today, and I can't change that from the outside in one afternoon, and right now we need them more than I need to be right. It's the worst thing I've asked you. I'm sorry."

Layla looked at him a long, hard moment — and understood that the apology was real, that it cost him, that the cost was the whole point. "Okay," she said. "But you owe me every word."

"Every word," he agreed, and got out, and went to the fire with his hands open and empty and his eyes bare, and Layla watched from the vehicle as the man who could not be rushed sat down with men who could not be rushed and did the thing he did — the stillness, his whole body coming down to their rhythm. He greeted them in **Arabic**, the desert's lingua franca, slow and formal and correct, the long courteous back-and-forth you do not skip out there; and once, early, he set down three or four words of their own **Tamasheq** — not fluent, plainly, just enough to show he knew it *was* their own, that Arabic was the guest's language and theirs was the language of the house — and Layla watched the eyes above the indigo cloth change at the sound of it, the small recalibration of men deciding a stranger was not quite the usual stranger. He drank three glasses of tea poured from a great height, bitter to sweet, and talked for two hours, she could see, about nothing: the weather, the camels, a son gone to Tripoli, a death, a birth, before he ever asked for news, and then, last — in Arabic, in the plainest words there are — where the water was.

And then Layla saw him do a thing she had never seen him do in all the weeks and all the roads: he **drew the kukri.** The big curved blade had ridden on his thigh since Cairo, the thing every eye snagged on and dismissed, and not once had it left its sheath — not in the Gallery, not in the wadi-to-come, not for any threat the desert had thrown at them. He had carried it a thousand kilometres and never unsheathed it. He unsheathed it now, at a fire, in peace, to give it away — and even from the vehicle, even at that distance, Layla saw the firelight run down the recurve of it and saw that it was not a tourist's toy at all.

It was *beautiful,* the terrible economical beauty of a thing whose only purpose had carved its every line, the belly weighted exactly where a falling cut wants the weight, the spine thick as a thumb, the edge a long patient hunger — form born so completely out of function that it had come out the far side into a kind of grace, the way a sailing hull is beautiful, the way a raptor's wing is beautiful, because nothing on it is for show and everything on it is *true*. He turned it in his hand and offered it to the old man **hilt-first,** the immemorial way, the blade laid back along his own forearm so the edge faced no one. And the elder took the haft and the blade dipped with the unexpected *weight* of it — Layla saw his hand drop a centimetre, saw the small surprised set of his shoulders, the wince-and-then-wonder of a man who had thought he knew what he was being handed and found it heavier and finer and more honest than the seeming — and he looked at it a long moment in the firelight the way you look at a true thing, and then up at Jakobus, and something passed between them that needed no language at all.

And Layla, watching, understood the last thing about the knife, the thing under all the others. It was not a tool he used. It was the **last** tool — the one he never drew because the day he drew it was the day everything else had already failed: the talking, the reading, the disarming, the going-around, the whole patient architecture of a man who survived by never needing the worst thing he carried. If the kukri ever came off his thigh in a fight it would mean the fight was already lost, that it had come down to edge and weight and a last terrible economy, and that he was spending the one thing he could not take back. It would be the end of all of them — and the end of *him,* whatever was left of him after, because he would only ever unsheath it for the oldest reason there is, the single reason that could make a man who had laid down every weapon pick this one up: to stand between a blade and someone he loved, and be the one who did not walk away. That he could give it to a stranger across a fire, freely, hilt-first, was the proof that this desert and this night were *peace* — that the worst thing he owned would not be needed here. The gift was the blade. The meaning was the safety.

He came back at full dark with a route, and two of Roeg's watchers marked on the map who'd thought themselves invisible, and the lasting respect of an old man to whom he'd given a knife. And not just any knife. Layla clocked it before she understood it — that his thigh was *bare,* the whole rig gone, kukri and sheath both, the big forward-curved Nepali blade and the worn leather that had always carried it, handed across the fire entire, because of course you do not give a man a blade and keep its sheath; you give the whole of a thing or you have given nothing. She had seen, once, what was rolled up with that knife — a square of parchment gone soft as cloth with handling, a certificate in two scripts from a house in Kathmandu that had been forging them by hand for a hundred years, the blade's pedigree and its maker's name — and she understood, watching the bare thigh, that he had given *that* too, the provenance and the proof, the one object on him that anyone could see was worth real money. The Tuareg elder had taken it with both hands and the particular gravity of a man who knew exactly what he was being handed.

And the strange part — the part that told her how far down this road she'd come — was that she had not looked at the knife in days. She'd stopped seeing the kit somewhere back on the river and started seeing the man, so it was not the absence of the famous blade she registered first but the bareness of *him,* a man gone one object lighter. And it *had* cost him — she'd seen that too, the flicker before he drew it, the half-beat where his hand stayed on the haft a fraction longer than a careless man's would; this was no shedding of a prop, it was the giving-away of a thing that mattered, and the cost was the whole point, because a gift that costs the giver nothing is not a gift, it is only an object changing hands, and Jakobus did not deal in those. He had given the most valuable thing he owned, and it had hurt, and that was *why* it sealed the debt. It had been handed over for water and silence, and never mentioned, then or after. The knife had only ever been the thing you were meant to look at. He got in. He sat a second.

"Right," he said to Layla, not starting the engine. "Every word. It started with the weather." And he told her all of it, the whole two hours,

the son and the millet and the three glasses and the water, while the desert went purple and then black, because he'd said he would, and because — she was learning the shape of him — he kept the small promises like a religion.

You did not run a route like the one the old man had given them on no sleep and a head full of fear, Jakobus said; you ran it rested, a night later, with the body ready. So they made their own camp a kilometre off, in the lee of a low rock spur where a fire wouldn't carry, and ate, and waited out the dark hours that were theirs before the dark hours that wouldn't be.

It was nobody's fault, and that was why it was funny — afterward.

The camp was two tents and the Cruiser and a canvas screen Dalia had rigged off the side mirror for washing, and Layla had thought Jakobus was still down at the spur with Ben, and Jakobus had thought the screen meant the space behind it was empty, and they were both wrong by about four seconds. He came round the back of the truck for the water bladder and she was there, half out of her shirt in the last of the light, and for one frozen instant the most dangerous man Layla had ever met stood absolutely rooted — and then *fled*. There was no other word for it. He about-faced so fast he nearly took the screen with him, got three steps, said "*Ag* — sorry — I thought —" in a voice that had lost every bit of its flat calm, and went, with his ears, she saw before he turned, going a deep and total red, this weathered, scarred, unshakeable man blushing like a *boy,* like a dominee's son caught somewhere he shouldn't be, all the way to the back of his neck.

He didn't look at her for the next hour. He found things to do at the far side of the fire. When he finally had to hand her a mug of tea he did it at arm's length with his eyes somewhere over her left shoulder and a muttered apology she'd already forgiven and he plainly hadn't forgiven himself, and Layla — who had grown up watched, in a country where a man's eyes on you were a thing you learned to weather young — found the whole performance so unexpected and so *sweet* that she

nearly laughed, and didn't, because it would have finished him.

"Jakobus," she said, at last, taking pity. "It's fine. Nothing happened."

"It is not *fine,*" he said, to the fire, with enormous dignity. "A man should be able to walk round his own truck without —" He stopped. Worked his jaw. "I'll knock. From now on I'll knock on the open desert. Whatever it takes."

And she understood, watching him be undone by four seconds of an accident, exactly how safe she was with this man — that whatever else he was, whatever he'd done in the years he never spoke of, the line around her was one he would set himself on fire before he crossed, and that his being *mortified* was the proof of it, the way another man's smoothness would have been the warning. He was at home among a dozen kinds of people and a dozen kinds of bareness across a whole continent, and he was scarlet over four seconds of *hers,* because the only modesty that mattered to him was the one whose house he was standing in. It was the most reassuring thing she had ever seen a man do, and he had done it by accident, and would have given a great deal to take it back.

And then Jakobus did a thing none of them expected.

He went to the Cruiser — not into the back for a tool, just to the cab — and opened the driver's door, and then walked round and opened all of them, every door of the rust-tired bakkie swung wide to the dark like a thing unfolding its wings, and the tailgate too. Then he stood back with a small black remote in his palm, the kind of fob you'd take for a central-locking key, and thumbed it, and waited, and grinned.

For a second nothing. Then the desert *arrived.*

It came up out of the open truck and out of the rock and the sand and the soles of their feet before the ear had any say in it — a low first note, then the whole envelope of it, bass you did not hear so much as *stand inside,* and Ben felt it take him in the sternum and the back teeth, a place in the body he had not known a sound could reach. Layla put

a hand flat on a rock and felt the stone *answer*. The thing that had "no business in a truck this rough," the German system he'd clocked on day one and filed under *odd*, was not a car stereo at all. It was a serious instrument that happened to live in a bakkie, and somebody had built it to do exactly this: open the doors and turn the whole vehicle into a speaker cabinet aimed at the open sky.

And it was *loud* — far louder than it had ever been in the cab over a week of driving, where Jakobus had played his music at a level Ben had privately thought of as a bit much. He understood his error now, with the whole desert ringing: that *had not been Jakobus's loud*. That had been Jakobus keeping it decent for the people sharing the box with him — turned down, the way you turn down for guests. This, doors flung to the dark, no walls, no one to deafen but the dunes — *this* was the volume the man actually heard the world at, and it was enormous.

It was Dalia, of all of them, who said it, dry, over the bass: that the old soldier was half deaf. Not delicately. Jakobus didn't take offence — he tapped his own ear, conceding it, and said something Ben only half caught and would put together later: that it was not the music that did it. It was a boy with a rifle and no ear-plugs, a thousand rounds before anyone thought to protect a child's hearing, the flat hard *crack* of it stacking up over years until the high frequencies went quiet for good. A man's ears, spent young on a thing that had nothing to do with joy — so that now, when he wanted joy, he had to turn it up past where anyone whole would, and had spent a life turning it back down again for everyone else. The loud music was not indulgence. It was a man reaching, a little harder than the rest of them had to, for a sound he could still feel.

Ben, who could not help it, took it apart in his head — it was the only way he knew how to love something, by understanding it, and his mind did it before he could stop it. He knew sound the way few people bothered to any more: back home in Cape Town he played his records — proper classical, the patient analogue ritual — off a turntable he'd bedded on a slab of granite, dead-flat dense stone to drink the vibration so the needle read the groove and nothing the room shoved back

at it, the same surface-plate trick a machinist used and, he never said it out loud, the same hard stone the old builders out here had read better than anyone since. A man who isolates a stylus on granite to hear one cello cleanly does not mistake loud for good. So he heard, at once, what this was. That much clean bass was not loudness; it was *engineering*. He could hear the subwoofer somewhere low in the chassis married to a proper horn loaded behind the door cards — the wave shaped and folded the way the old builders shaped sound down a passage cut in stone — and fed off, he'd have bet the bakkie on it, an amplifier voiced the warm, slightly theatrical way only one or two old Italian houses bothered to voice them any more, the circuitry behind it unmistakably Japanese in its cool exactness, and somewhere in the signal path the contacts gold-plated, because gold was the one metal that would not corrode to a whisper in a decade of desert dust and river damp. *Another little seam of gold,* he thought, *doing the quiet work, where no one would think to look* — and the thought went somewhere he didn't follow, because the bass came round again and took the floor of his chest, and he let it.

Because here was the joke of him, the engineer's joke: he understood it *completely* — the folded horn, the chassis as a cabinet, the Italian warmth and the Japanese nerve and the incorruptible gold — and understanding it took nothing from it. He knew exactly how the trick was done and the trick still reached into him and moved something that had no name and no schematic. That, he thought, was the whole of this truck, and possibly the whole of this man: a sleeper. A thing built with total competence to look like nothing — the rust-tired bakkie, the soft-bellied tourist — that did to you, when it opened up, what no amount of knowing how could defend against. The ugly truck was the man. He wondered if Jakobus had ever once owned a thing that was what it looked like.

And then the other thing fell into place — the thing he'd been half-counting for a week without knowing he was doing it, because counting was what his hands did when his mouth was shut. A whole week of driving, and Jakobus's music had been the maddest spread Ben had

ever sat through: Tuareg guitar into some Afrikaans dirge into a tooth-rattling psytrance thing into an old English rap into a low rock track with a *didgeridoo* droning under it — that one had come round more than once, the drone sitting under the guitars like a floor under a room — no genre, no through-line, a playlist assembled by a man having a series of unrelated moods. Except. Ben had been tapping the door-sill to it, idly, the whole time — he tapped along to everything, it was a disease — and now, with the desert ringing and his own pulse up, the number surfaced from wherever the back of his head had been keeping it: *it never changed.* The tempo. Whatever came on, however different, it sat in the same narrow window — fast, but not frantic, a steady hundred-and-thirty-ish, give or take. The genres were chaos. The *beat* was a constant.

He worked it the way he worked everything, fast and without permission. A hundred and thirty, near enough — and a calm man's heart, a fit calm man at rest, runs maybe sixty-five. *Half of it.* The beat landed on every second pulse, two hits to the heartbeat, a clean two-to-one: exactly the ratio a body locks onto without trying, the way you fall into step with a march or a passing train. The man wasn't choosing songs. He was choosing a *tempo,* every time, under the genre, probably without even knowing he did it any more — picking, out of all the music on earth, only the music that beat at twice the heart rate he wanted, so that whatever he put on would reach in and take his pulse by the hand and walk it down to the number where he was dangerous and calm. *The maddest playlist on the planet,* Ben thought, half in love with it, *and every single track is the same BPM, because it isn't a playlist. It's a pacemaker.* He looked at the soft-bellied man dancing with his eyes shut and decided not to say it out loud. Some things you let a man keep.

It was not music she had a name for. It had no name; that was its name. Something started it off that was all hand-drum and a guitar bent into shapes a guitar shouldn't make — desert music, the music of the people whose fire they'd just left — and then it slid, without asking anyone, into a thing that was pure pulse, four beats to the bar and the

bar going on forever, a festival heartbeat, the kind of sound built for ten thousand people in a field at three in the morning and working, somehow, exactly as well on six tired fugitives and an old man in the middle of the largest emptiness on earth.

This one *did* have a name — an old track, English, a rapper's voice riding a bassline built like a weapon, a song about being thought mad and deciding it was freedom instead, and a line in it about a heavy bass being a man's idea of silence. Jakobus's whole face changed when it came on. He turned it up.

And Layla, watching him reach for the volume with his sleeve fallen back, saw the thing she had not seen before, because she had finally stopped cataloguing his kit and started reading his skin. Two tattoos she knew: the cheap Africa outline she'd dismissed weeks ago, and the Arabic down his inner forearm she'd read and understood was the real one, the discipline against fear. But there was a third, small, lower, that she'd never been close enough or quiet enough to clock — not words this time, a *symbol*: a little curl, a comma, two dots beside it. It took her a moment, in the firelight, and then she had it, from a music room a lifetime ago: a **bass clef.** The sign that tells a reader *this stave is the low end, the deep notes, the bass.* He had the word he lived by tattooed on his arm and it wasn't a word at all — it was the mark for the thing itself. And the longer she looked at the little curl and its two dots the larger it got, because it was not only one rapper's bassline, was it — it was *every* drum. The hollow log a man first hit with a stick and heard the valley answer. The skin stretched over a frame at every fire on every continent for as long as there had been fires. The beat tribes had spoken to each other across distances before anyone thought to scratch a word into clay. Bass was the oldest thing people made that was pure feeling, the heartbeat of a culture turned loud enough to dance to — and this man, who loved old peoples and the things they knew with a reverence she was only beginning to understand, had chosen the *deepest and oldest of all their instruments*, the one the body hears before the ear is taught anything, and worn it on his skin as a single clean mark. And as the bassline came round again

and went through all of them like weather, she watched him not even glance at it, the way you never look at the truest thing on your own skin, and she understood. She did not have to read a lyric. The clef said it, and the song said it, and the man turning the desert up to eleven said it loudest of all.

And it landed in her, all at once, the whole collage she'd been building of him for a thousand kilometres resolving into a single picture the way a constellation does when someone finally tells you the shape: the man who could not hear properly and so lived loud; who carried fear in old Arabic on one arm and joy in a little curl of music on the other and was, somehow, exactly as serious about both; who set his heart to a bassline and thought that was sanity and was, she saw now, completely right. The song was saying something about how the world called a man like that mad and the man just called it free — and the soft-bellied lethal gentle impossible creature turned the desert up to eleven and shut his eyes and proved it.

And Jakobus danced.

That was the thing none of them were ready for, the thing Layla would set beside the gun-disarm and the wadi and the perfume in the collage she was building of him and never quite finish: that the careful man, the watchful man, the man who parked facing out and read every exit and took his glasses off for boys with borrowed rifles — *let go.* Completely. All at once, the way a held breath goes. He danced with no plan and no audience, his eyes half-shut and his head back and the soft belly and the grey beard and the whole un-Hollywood unbeautiful bulk of him moving with a grace that made no sense until you understood where it came from — a thousand fires in a thousand places, a thousand quiet nights of watching how a people moved and letting it into the body, the *Sawubona* attention turned at last all the way around and pointed, for once, at nothing but his own joy. He was not performing it. That was what undid her. There was no one he was trying to disarm. He had simply found, in the middle of the worst week of all their lives, a reason to be glad in his own skin, and he was taking it with both hands.

"*He dances,*" Layla said, stupidly, out loud, to no one.

"He dances," Hagg Yusuf agreed, from the rock where he sat wrapped against the cold, and there was a wet shine in the old man's eyes and a smile under it, the first clean smile any of them had seen on him since the tunnel. "Let him. A man who can be that *open* in a place like this is a man who has decided not to be afraid tonight." He turned his face back to the fire. "Tomorrow we can be afraid again."

Tarek went first, because Tarek was nineteen and the bass was a language he already spoke, and he came up off the sand grinning and threw himself into it with the boneless certainty of a boy who had grown up on Cairo wedding floors, and the two of them — the boy and the broken-in old operator — found the beat together and lost their minds to it side by side.

Layla went next. She had not meant to. She was the most important person on the surface of the earth and her brother was going to be taken from her again at a chamber under the sea in three days, and she stood up off the rock with her own headscarf coming loose and danced because the alternative was to keep sitting still inside her own chest, and the moment she did, something that had been wound tight in her for a thousand kilometres came loose and went up into the dark with the sparks.

Even Dalia. Dalia, who moved things and people and problems and never once let any of them see her do anything she had not decided to do, watched the three of them for a long minute with her arms folded and her face unreadable in the firelight — and then she snorted, and shook her head, and said something in Arabic that was clearly unrepeatable, and got up, and danced like a woman correcting an error in the universe, precise and furious and wonderful.

And it was not the dance the tourists pay for. This was the old thing, the *baladi*, the dance of her own people done the way it is done when there is no audience to flatter — for the floor and the fire and herself. She closed her eyes. That was the first thing, and the thing that told you: a woman who watched everything, who drove the relay through

Cairo with a phone in each hand and missed nothing, *shut her eyes* and let the drum tell her body where to go. Her feet stayed close, almost still, planted on the sand — the dance did not travel; it lived in the centre of her, in the hips that found the beat and answered it and then began to argue with it, a slow figure-eight that sharpened, on the hard beat, into a single clean *accent*, hip dropping like a struck thing. Her shoulders rode a shimmer up off the bass, fast and fine, a vibration that ran the length of her and never reached her hands — and her hands were the other half of it, lifted, turning at the wrist the way a woman frames her own face, fingers loose and then articulate, drawing slow arabesques in the firelit air and folding them closed, opening, closing, a private calligraphy that meant nothing you could translate and everything you could feel. The bonfire threw her shadow huge across the sand and lit the sweat at her collarbone gold, and the desert stars stood over the whole of it, cold and enormous and old, and a hard Cairene fixer who buried no one and trusted nearly nothing danced under them with her eyes shut and her face, for once, undefended — the thing done *right,* the way her grandmother and her grandmother's grandmother had done it, here, where it came from. Layla watched her and forgot, for a moment, to be afraid. Ben watched her and understood he was seeing something he had not earned and would not see again.

Ben was last, and the worst, and knew it. He was the man with the ruler. He had spent his whole life standing at the edge of rooms measuring them. He stood now at the edge of this one with a tin mug going cold in his hand and the bass trying to get into a body that had spent forty years not letting things in, and he watched Layla dance with her face open to the sky, and he thought, with the particular despair of a man who can calculate exactly how foolish he is about to look and does it anyway: *oh, to hell with the tolerance.* And he put the mug down. And he danced — badly, stiffly, an engineer's approximation of abandon, all elbows and miscounted beats — and Layla saw him do it and laughed, and took both his hands, and he stopped, for the length of one impossible song, being afraid of being wrong.

They danced until it was danced out of them — until the fear and the grief and the held-tight dread of the run had gone out through the soles of their feet into the sand and left them wrung out and light and finally, blessedly empty. You could see it happen, one by one: the moment a body stopped running from something and simply moved, and then, a while later, the moment it had had enough and was at peace to stop. Nobody decided it together. They just, in their own time, slowed, and stilled, and were done.

Jakobus, breathing hard, drenched, grinning like the much younger and much stupider man who waded into every water, reached into the cab last of all and killed it. And the desert came back in — not a dead silence but a *living* one, the small night-sounds returning to fill the space the bass had held: the tick of the cooling engine, a breath of wind moving sand grain over grain, something small and far off in the dark, the fire settling with a sigh of ash. The quiet punctuated, not empty. It was different now, that silence, warmer, the silence of people who have been somewhere together that they will not be able to explain to anyone who wasn't there. He went round and shut the doors, one by one, folding the truck's wings back down.

They would sleep, that night, the deep dreamless sleep of the unburdened — even Ben, even with the run at dawn — because the thing the dance had done was the thing no watch-rotation or ration could do: it had emptied them out so there was room, for a few hours, to rest.

"You've done that before," Layla said, into the warm dark. Not quite a question. "Opened the doors. Made the truck a thing to dance around."

Jakobus was quiet a moment, a hand resting on the warm metal. "Three weddings," he said, as if that were the answer, and the count was exact, offered the way another man would offer a medal. "When the music died and there wasn't any more for a hundred kilometres. No little speakers then — if the PA went, the dance went with it, and everyone stood around looking at their shoes." And then, because the fire was low and the desert was kind and he was, for once, too danced-

out to keep all his doors shut, he told them about the best of the three — a wedding in a town so small it was only a post office, the grain silos, and a spaza shop, the hall's sound system dead an hour in, and a younger, stupider Jakobus who had looked at the dying party and then at the Cruiser in the car park and reached the one conclusion any reasonable man would reject.

"Drove it in through the double doors," he said, and the grin came back, helpless. "Onto the dance floor. Opened every door, put the system up loud as it went, and the whole wedding danced around the bakkie till the sun came up." He shook his head at the memory of himself. "Couldn't get the tyre-marks off the floor after. Black, right across the boards. They tried everything — never came out." A beat, fond and far away. "That town still talks about it, I'd put money on it. The night some idiot drove a Land Cruiser into the hall so the bride could dance." He looked at the dark shape of the Beast with its doors closed now. "Tonight was the same trick. Just more room, and no floor to mark."

"Three," Ben said. The engineer, counting. He thought it was probably the truest CV the man had.

Nobody said anything for a moment. It was Layla who finally did, softly. "You've spent your whole life," she said, "making sure nobody's night dies for want of music."

He didn't answer that. But the not-answering was the answer, and Ben understood it was the same wiring as the bass that scared the birds and the doors that opened to a stranger and the hand flat on the ground — a man who had seen enough nights go dark to have made it a private law that the ones he could reach would not.

"Sleep," Jakobus said, and his voice had the rasp of a man who'd shouted along to something. He pushed the last door to with a soft chunk and the desert had all its quiet back. "Tomorrow night we run. Tonight we were people." He looked, for a moment, almost shy about it, the abandon folding back down into the careful man as smoothly as the paracord re-braiding onto his wrist. A beat, to the fire, not to them.

"So did I."

The desert cold had come in hard with the fire gone to embers, and Layla — pulling her jacket tight with both hands — noticed, for the first time in the whole impossible journey, that she had never once seen him reach for a layer. Not on the Nile when the river air came off the water at three in the morning. Not in the quarry where the shade cut the heat to a genuine chill. Not now, in a Saharan night that had its teeth in.

"You're not cold," she said.

He glanced down at his own bare arms as if checking. "No."

"*How.*"

He looked at her a moment, and then he held out his hands.

She took them — both of them, without quite deciding to — and the warmth stopped her. Not the heat of exertion, not the flush of the dancing still in him; something deeper and steadier than that, the kind of warmth a stone holds after a long day of sun, sitting in the dark and still giving it back. It came from somewhere inside him that the desert hadn't reached. She held his hands for a moment in both of hers, feeling the steadiness of it, and then let go.

"Monks," he said. Flat, no elaboration offered.

She stood with that. *Monks.* She added it to the collage without a frame, and let him keep the cold he wasn't fighting and the warmth he wouldn't explain, and went to find her bag before the night took the last of the fire.

Chapter 14 — The Gate in the Wadi

The next night, rested, the moon a day older and the cold settled and the body ready, the Tuareg route ran north across country that had never owned a road, and Jakobus drove it the way he did everything, without hurry and without lights where the moon would do, the Cruiser swimming over the cooling sand on its soft yellow shocks with the snorkel throwing a thin shadow up the windscreen and the big tyres letting down soft to float them where a stock vehicle would have dug in to the axles and died. Ben sat in the back and watched the man read the dark — a line of dune-shadow here, a hardpan reg there, the old fort the marabout had named to the second decimal of a place that wasn't on Ben's phone or anyone's — and understood, slowly, that the route was not a set of directions. It was a man and a vehicle and a country, all three known down to the bone, agreeing on a line.

The watchers found them anyway, an hour before the green.

It was the better of the two — the one the old man had marked with a thumb and a single dry word, the one who knew this country nearly as well as Jakobus did — and he'd worked out, the way a hunter works out a drinking-place, the one defile the route had to thread: a wadi cut deep through a shelf of rock where the sand funnelled between two walls too steep and too soft to climb, a gate the desert itself had built. He didn't need to catch them. He only needed to be standing in the gate. Roeg wanted them late and herded, not dead; a vehicle nosed

across the throat of that wadi did the whole job, because a Land Cruiser that has to stop and turn in soft sand under walls is a Land Cruiser that has stopped, and a man who has stopped can be made to wait, and a girl who arrives at the sea on the kidnapper's schedule arrives already half-broken.

The blocker came on at the last possible second, lights blazing up out of a side-cut where it had sat dark and patient — a hard white double-cab slewing across the wadi mouth, close, far too close, and behind them the soft sand they'd just floated down on a knife's edge of momentum, the kind of sand you do not get a heavy vehicle moving in again from a standstill before a man with a radio has finished talking.

Ben felt the trap close the way you feel a lift drop. *Penned.* He saw it land on Jakobus too — saw it in the back of the man's neck, a stillness going wrong, the same stillness Jennefer Abrahams had once watched curdle in a ruined keeper's yard a continent away, though Ben had no way to know that. The shades were off for the dark. In the dash-glow his eyes had gone a pale that had nothing to do with the light, the pale of a man whose oldest and deepest wiring has just been told the one thing it cannot hear: *you can't go.*

For half a second — and Ben would never see this part, no one ever would — the man was nine years old and the world was a steel safe and a locked room and there was no door, there was never a door, and the thing that lived under his sternum stood up out of its long sleep and said the only word it had ever known, which was *out,* not a thought, not a plan, older than either: *out, out, out, by any wall, at any cost, only out.* He let it stand. He did not fight it; he had learned, on a floor in another country, that you do not fight it, you put it in front of you and let it pull, because it had never once been wrong about which way was alive.

But a thing pulling that hard will spend you — will dump the whole tank of you into your hands in one shaking flood and leave you with too much to be precise — and precise was the only currency he had left. So he did the other thing, the thing he had been doing since before he had words for it, since long before the monks gave it a name. He

reached, inside, for a beat. Not the radio; there was no radio now, only the diesel's labouring growl and his own roaring blood. He found the beat from the night before instead, the great four-on-the-floor pulse of the desert dance, still in him somewhere under the sternum where the bass had lived — and he laid his hammering heart against it the way you lay a wild rope over a still bollard, and *held,* and made the heart take the slower count instead of its own. One. Two. The flood did not stop. He did not need it to stop. He needed it slow enough to aim. His pulse came down onto the remembered bar and sat there, and the shaking went out of his hands and into the wheel, where it could do some good.

The walls were too steep. The sand was too soft. There was one ramp.

"Hold the door handle," Jakobus said. Flat. Wrong-flat. "Both of you. Don't brace your neck."

"Jakobus —" Layla started.

"Door handle."

He did not reverse. There was no reverse to be had and he didn't waste the half-second pretending. He swung the Cruiser hard off the blocker's line, down the soft inside of the wadi where the sand was deepest and worst and no sane driver would point a heavy truck — and Ben understood, in the lurch of it, that he wasn't trying to get *around* the double-cab. He was trying to get up the one part of the wadi wall that wasn't sheer, a long soft ramp of blown sand banked against the rock, the kind of line that needed more than a tired diesel had in it, a wall of sand that would catch a vehicle halfway up and hold it like a fly in honey and leave it hanging there nose to the stars for the watcher to stroll up to at his leisure —

— and his left hand came off the wheel and hit the bracket on the bulkhead. The one behind the back seat. The fire extinguisher that wasn't.

Ben never heard a button. He heard the engine — which had been a

labouring diesel growl — simply *change,* not louder but *deeper,* a hard chemical shove that came up through the seat and the floor and his own sternum, the exact place the truck's own bass had filled him the night before, doors flung open, while a soft-bellied man danced under the stars. The same doorway into the body. An obscene thing coming through it this time.

And the engineer in him understood it the way you understand a slap — all at once, before thought, the knowledge arriving as a thing felt in the teeth and the gut rather than a thing worked out. He did not have time to reason it. He didn't need to. His whole stupid useless beautiful expertise stood up and *screamed* the answer in the half-instant the shove hit him: *not a fire extinguisher — nitrous — oxidiser, not fuel — oxygen, it's feeding it oxygen* — a solenoid somewhere cracking open, the bottle dumping down a jet into the intake, the liquid flashing to gas the instant it hit air and going *cold* doing it — colder than the desert night, a hard breath of cold straight down the throat of the engine — and that was the other half of the trick, the half the films never bother with: the cold did not just carry oxygen, it *shrank the air,* packed it dense, an intercooler in a bottle, more of everything crammed into the same swept cylinder than the old motor had ever been fed in its life. Oxygen and density together, in one shove. The N□O splitting in the heat of the cylinder to inert nitrogen and free oxygen; the old sooty diesel that had spent its whole life choking on too much fuel and too little air suddenly handed all the air in the world, and cold dense air at that, and burning, at last, every black wasted gram of what it had been coughing onto the road for twenty years. *That's why a diesel. Over-fuelled its whole life, all that surplus dumped as soot — give it the air and it finally burns its own hunger. That's why it works.* The thought was not a sentence. It was a single white flare of *yes, of course, you clever, clever bastard,* gone as fast as it came, leaving only the smell of it — the engine eating its own held-back hunger in one roar — and the black banner of unburnt glory unrolling out the pipe behind them, the motor confessing in smoke exactly how much it had just been asked to be.

The thrust pasted him into the seatback and turned the dying climb up the sand into something violent and sudden and brief. The Cruiser stopped swimming and *bit*. It went up the soft ramp it had no right to climb, the back end clawing, sand howling off the tyres in two long rooster-tails lit red by the brake lights and the black smoke pouring up through them, the whole vehicle canting hard over with one set of wheels on the wall and the desert tilting through the windscreen — and for one impossible second they were above the double-cab, looking down on its roof as the watcher's white face turned up at them through his own glass, and then the nose came down over the lip of the shelf with a crash that snapped Ben's teeth shut and the Cruiser was on the hardpan above the wadi, on flat open reg, running north, free.

And the shove was gone.

It did not come back. Ben felt Jakobus reach for it once more — a flinch of the left hand toward the bracket, instinct — and felt nothing answer, the line dead, the one shot spent, gone now and forever, and watched the man's hand come back to the wheel and stay there.

And then Jakobus did the small thing Ben had seen him do on the river road, after the lorries — the hand laid flat on the top of the dashboard, the two soft pats — except it was not the same now, and Ben knew it the moment he saw it. On the good day it had been the way you pat a dog that did a clean bit of work. This was the way you pat a dog that has just done the hard thing you asked and you both know cost it. "That'll do, Bees," Jakobus said, low, not to any of them. "That'll do." The truck knocked on under the words, wrong and arrhythmic and dying, and he listened to it do it and patted the dash once more and put his hand back on the wheel.

Behind them the double-cab's lights bucked and slewed at the wadi mouth, trying the soft ramp, finding out what soft sand and no momentum and a stock suspension cost a man, bogging to the doors. By the time it clawed free they would be in the green, and then the city, and then the sea, and the watcher would make a call he did not want to make to a man who did not tolerate the word *lost*.

Nobody said anything for a long time. The truck ran north over the cooling hardpan, but it ran wrong now — a deep new knock had come up from under the bonnet, low and arrhythmic, the sound of an old engine that had been asked for one thing more than it had and had given it and would not forgive being asked. Ben knew that sound the way Jakobus knew ground. It wasn't a tick you nursed home and fixed in a week. The boost had over-stressed a motor two decades old; somewhere in there a thing had let go, or was letting go, and the smell of hot oil was coming through the vents now, and the temperature needle was climbing with a patience that meant the Cruiser would get them to the coast and to a workshop and then, almost certainly, no further on this engine. Jakobus drove with both hands and breathed like a man coming back up from a long way under, and Ben — who understood machines, and had just felt, unmistakably, fifty thousand dollars of hidden engineering fire exactly once and kill the thing it lived in — knew better than to say a single word about it.

It was Layla, of course, who said it.

"That," she said, unsteady, "was not a fire extinguisher."

Jakobus drove for a while.

"It was," he said at last. Hoarse. Not flat now — scraped, the wall down because he hadn't got it back up yet. "It's a fire extinguisher every day of its life but one." He let out a breath. "*The Beast,*" he said, and it was the first time Ben had heard him give the truck a name, the way you only say a name aloud when you're losing the thing it belongs to — and Ben understood, all at once, that he had had the name wrong the whole way up the river. He'd assumed, the way anyone would, that you called a thing the Beast because it *drank* like one — the fuel gauge falling like a stone, the diesel fed in at every second town, the thirst that made no sense for so tired a shell. That was the surface, the joke, the answer you were meant to stop at. But he had just *felt* the real reason come up through the floor of the cab — the chemical roar, the shove that pasted him into the seat, the thing that had crouched silent under that scabby bonnet for eighteen years waiting for one bad

night — and the name stopped being about thirst and became, simply and exactly, *true*. You did not call it the Beast for what it ate. You called it the Beast for what it *was,* the single time it was ever let off the leash to be it. "I've had her eighteen years. That was the one shot she had. And I just spent it." The knock ran on under the bonnet, low and wrong, and he listened to it the way you listen to a friend's bad cough, and something went over his face that Ben had not seen there before and would not see again. "Hear that? That's the engine going. I asked it for more than it had. It'll get us to the sea and then it's done — new motor, full rebuild, if I can even find the parts out here." A pause. "Eighteen years. It's never once let me down, and the one time I made it save us, I killed it doing it." He breathed. "I'd have given a lot not to spend it tonight. But they had the gate, and I don't —" his jaw worked, the pale still in his eyes "— I don't do well behind a gate. There are men who can sit and wait it out and think their way through. I'm not one. The day I can't go is the day I do something stupid, and the only thing I've ever found that's less stupid than the stupid thing—" he tipped his head a half-degree at the dead bracket, the spent line, the empty trick "— is that. Once. Tonight." He glanced at Layla, then back at the dark. "Don't tell anyone it was there. Half of what kept us alive on this road is that nobody ever thinks the truck can do anything. Including, most days, me."

Ben looked at the back of the neck of the man who had just clawed them out of a grave the desert had dug — not with a gun, not with a quip, not with anything you could put on a poster — and revised, quietly, one more time, his entire estimate of Jakobus Swart, in the direction of *do not pen this man,* and *do not ever be the gate*.

There was an old film. Ben had seen it as a boy, on a Saturday, the way every boy his age had seen it — the lawman with the maxed-out truck that looked like a wreck and wasn't, buried alive in it by the villain, who fed it the bottle and *blew himself up out of his own grave* and rolled out of the dirt into the daylight and said something to the cop about supercharging. It had thrilled him senseless at nine. He had not thought of it in thirty years, and he thought of it now, in the cooling

cab with the engine knocking itself to death under the bonnet, and the thought was not *that was just like the film.* The thought was that the film had got it exactly, precisely, childishly *wrong* — had taken the one true thing, the buried man and the hidden fire and the claw back up into the light, and hung a *grin* on it, a one-liner, a wink to the camera, a cool that was the opposite of anything real. Because the real thing, the thing Ben had just sat inside of, had no grin in it anywhere. The man up front was not supercharging *thi*s at anyone. He was shaking, and hoarse, and grieving a truck, and patting a dying engine like a dog he'd had to work past its heart, and the only line he'd had was *that'll do, Bees,* said low, to no one, with the wall down. The boy on the Saturday had wanted to *be* the man in the film. The man Ben had actually met would have walked a hundred kilometres of bad sand to never once need to be him — and *that,* Ben understood, watching the grey beard and the spent hands and the truck dying for them in the dark, was the whole difference between the poster and the man, and it was the most that any film had ever taught him by getting a thing wrong.

The sea was four hours off. They drove toward it, lighter by one impossible thing, and did not speak of it again.

Chapter 15 — The Drowned City

Abu Qir Bay does not look like anything. That was the thing nobody tells you, the thing Ben stood on the dive boat and reckoned with in the grey dawn: the most extraordinary place on the journey, the far end of the makers' relay, the thing the disc had pointed to all the way down the river — and on the surface it was just s*ea,* flat pewter water off the coast east of Alexandria, a low brown shore, fishing boats, the haze of the city, gulls. Nothing. You could sail over the wonder of the age and not know it was under your keel, which was, Ben thought, exactly the makers' point. They drowned it. They drowned it on purpose. The hiding was the design.

He turned the disc over in his hands. It had been a desert thing, a quarry thing, a long-river thing; now it sat warm against his palm in a sea wind, and the warmth was *climbing,* the way a kettle climbs before it sings.

"Thonis-Heracleion," said the dive captain, a broad quiet Alexandrian woman called Nadia whom Dalia had produced out of the silence the way she produced everyone, "is under us. The whole city." She put a thick finger on the chart, then lifted it and pointed straight down through the deck, which was somehow more convincing. "The ground liquefied. The Nile mud just — let go. Two thousand years ago." She tapped the chart. "Temples, harbours, the colossal gods. All of it down there. Like Atlantis was supposed to, except this one's

real, and it's documented. Twenty years the marine people have been raising it. Piece by piece." She looked at Ben with the flat respect of one technical person for another. "A five-metre god. A pharaoh. Steles taller than this boat. You can read the survey reports." A pause. "What's in no survey report is whatever your gold's screaming about. It hasn't stopped getting warmer since the harbour." A nod at Layla, wetsuited, white-faced, staring down into the water. "And she hasn't stopped looking like she can hear something the rest of us can't."

"I can," Layla said quietly. She did not look up from the water. Her breath was making small fast clouds in the cold. "It's down there. It's — Ben, it's the *loudest* one. A hundred miles getting louder." She pressed a gloved hand flat against the gunwale as if to keep it still. "Saqqara was a door open. Aswan, the sound behind a wall. This is — outside the biggest sound in the world. Waiting for somebody to knock."

"And nobody's knocked," Ben said.

"Not yet." She looked up then, and the white in her face had gone hard, which was worse than the fear. "Ben. Tarek's down there."

The wind dropped, or seemed to. Ben followed her eyes off the bow.

Three boats, standing off across the pewter water, sleek and expensive and patient, riding the swell with the smug stillness of things that cost more than a house. No nets. No tackle. Just waiting.

"Those are his," Layla said. "Roeg's already here. All night." Her voice did not shake, which cost her something. "He's waiting for me to open the door."

"Then we get there first," Ben said, and turned, and reached for the survey gear, the sonar unit, the gauge — the things that had never once lied to him — because if he was going to send the most important person on Earth down into the dark to do the most important thing anyone had ever done, he was going to *measure the door first.* He was going to ground every step of it. Whatever happened down there was going to happen to a wonder he had *checked,* because that was

the only thing he had to give her that was actually his, and he had a horrible feeling she was about to need it.

"Ben," Nadia said, as he hauled the sonar over. "Thirty metres. Bottom time's short and the silt's worse than the dark. You go down with a plan or you don't come up with a head."

"Then give me the plan," Ben said, "and I'll give you the door."

The descent was the most beautiful thing Ben van Kerk ever saw, and he had stood inside the Great Pyramid at dawn.

They went down through the grey into the green into the blue, and the blue deepened to a cobalt that was almost black, the dive-lights cutting cones of suspended silt that bloomed gold in the beams like the dust in the King's Chamber, like the gold that came up around Layla, and out of the cobalt dark, slowly, as they sank, the *city* resolved — and Ben forgot, for a moment, to breathe, which is a dangerous thing to forget at thirty metres.

Colossal faces. That was the first thing. A god's face the size of a car emerging out of the dark beneath them, serene, ruined, lying on its side in the silt where it had fallen two thousand years ago, the dive-lights raking across the stone, the eyes still calm. Temple blocks scattered like a child's bricks. A forest of broken columns, pale and furred with two thousand years of sea. A queen, fallen, her diorite face turned up toward a sky she hadn't seen in twenty centuries, beautiful, intact, the symmetry of her even now — Ben's eye, helpless, professional — *too good,* the bilateral perfection of the face a thing he would have to measure later and would find, he already knew, symmetric to the thousandth. The drowned dynastic city, the inheritor city, the city of heirs who had built gloriously on top of something and gone into the dark not knowing it was there. Sunk whole. And beneath it, *below* even it, older, the thing it had been built over without ever knowing—

"There," Layla breathed, through the comm, and pointed down, past the city, past the fallen gods, to where the seabed dropped into a

deeper dark.

And the disc in Ben's hand — he'd brought it down in a clear case clipped to his chest — *blazed,* warm enough to feel through the neoprene of his glove, the channels caught in the dive-light running with cold fire, every line of it lit like a circuit closing. And below them, in the deepest dark, was a *void*.

Ben got the sonar unit up. He made himself do it. He made himself ground it, even here, even now, even with his heart trying to climb out through his regulator, because that was who he was and it was the only gift he had that was actually his. He pinged the dark below them and watched the return on the little screen, hood-shadowed, his breath loud in his own ears — and his blood went cold in the cold water, colder than the water, because the return was *wrong*.

The return showed a chamber. A vast regular chamber cut into the bedrock beneath the drowned city, with walls too flat and angles too true, edges that pinged back the way the Serapeum boxes had read under his straightedge — a void the survey reports did not mention because they had never looked this deep, never had a reason to, a structure that *predated* the city above it by — by how long, nobody would ever know, that was the designated dark at the bottom of the story.

A coupling-chamber. The twin of the one a woman named Meena had read off a drowned shore on the far side of an ocean. The far end of the relay. The last note. *Real,* on his sonar, measured, *checkable,* a void in the rock that had no business existing and indisputably did.

"It's here," he said, through the comm, and his voice shook, and for once in his bought-and-doubted life he let it. "Layla. It's real. I've got it on the sonar — a chamber, below the city, walls flat to a tolerance no two-thousand-year-old mud city could hold, edges that ring like the boxes. It's the far end. It *matches India*." He laughed, once, a cracked underwater sound. "The relay runs all the way under the ocean. From a drowned shore off India to a drowned mouth off Egypt. They built it to be wet. The water's not the disaster, it's the *wire*. And it ends *here,*

and I can *prove it,* it's on the meter, it's—" He steadied himself against a fallen column the size of a bus. "And there's gold."

There was gold.

As they sank the last ten metres toward the void, the dive-lights found it — not treasure, not coin, not ornament, but *gold worked into the structure,* gold formed to function, the conductive resonant medium the whole impossible chase had been built on, gold channels and gold inlay running through the lip of the chamber like veins under skin. Ben, helpless, did the thing he always did, the thing that had cost him a career and earned him a crowd he didn't trust: he checked it. He ran his gauge along a band of it where it lay exposed in the silt and read a purity no ancient goldsmith and no modern one ever bothered with, because purity like this isn't for *looking,* it's for *carrying a signal.* And when he rapped it, gently, with the steel of the gauge, it rang — *wrong* — a tone too pure and too sustained for a lump of soft metal lying in the mud, a tone that hung in the water, that should not have hung in the water, that physics did not let a soft metal do—

— and Layla, ten feet away in the cobalt dark, *answered* it.

Her whole body went still. The bubbles stopped. And the disc on Ben's chest spiked off its needle, the gauge in his hand ringing under his fingers with the same impossible sustained tone, the resonance gathering, building toward her raised hand, the door under it about to open—

"S*top,*" said a voice on the comm.

A new voice. A cultured, amused, delighted, and entirely certain voice, patched into their channel from one of the patient boats above, dropped into the cobalt dark as cleanly as if Roeg were floating beside them.

"Oh, don't stop the *gold* part," the voice said warmly. "The gold part is glorious. Genuinely. I've funded the finest physicists money can rent and not one of them could make a soft metal hold a tone like that. Stop the *finding* part. You've found it. You've done the hard

bit." A small, contented sound, the sound of a man putting his feet up. "Thank you, Ben. Truly. You've saved me weeks, and several million, and the bother of being wrong in front of people. Now."

The voice changed gear. Not louder. Closer.

"Layla. Look to your left."

Layla looked to her left.

And out of the cobalt dark, lit by their own dive-lights, came divers — six of them, professional, fast, moving in the unhurried way of men who do not expect to be stopped, equipment that cost more than Nadia's boat — and in the middle of them, in a wetsuit too big for him, with a full-face mask and a regulator and eyes wide and white with terror behind the fogged glass, his thin shoulders held by a gloved hand on each side, was Tarek.

Layla's hand jerked toward him — a half-stroke through the water, an instinct, the start of a swim she didn't take — and stopped. Her mouth moved behind the glass. *No.* No sound, just the shape of it, just bubbles. The reaching hand hung there, fingers spread.

The gold around it guttered and died.

"I brought your brother to the door," said Roeg pleasantly, from the boat, watching it all on a screen somewhere warm and dry. "I told you I would. In the souk, the first day, before you knew what you were. I keep my promises — it's the only honest thing about me, but it's a *very* good one." A pause for it to land. "He's quite safe. As long as everyone's sensible. Though I'll point out, because I respect you too much to lie — we're thirty metres down, and air is a *finite resource,* and accidents at depth are so terribly easy to arrange and so terribly hard to prove. A regulator fails. A weight belt sticks. Tragedy. Inquest finds nothing."

One of the divers — gently, almost tenderly, which was the worst of it — laid two fingers on the coupling at Tarek's throat. Tarek's eyes went to his sister and held there, the way a drowning man holds the

last bright thing.

"So." Roeg's voice dropped, and the warmth in it was real, which was the horror of it. "Open the door, Layla. Walk in and sound it. Freely — yes, *freely,* my physicists won't shut up about that part, freely, with a glad and grateful heart, because your brother goes up the moment you do, up into the air and the sun, and you and I—" the *I* came out before he could stop it, and he covered it, smooth, an instant late — "you and I will *finally* hear what these people have kept from the rest of us for five thousand years. Do you have any idea what I had to do to be in this water? No. Of course you don't." A breath, and the smile audible again, pleased with itself. "Be glad. Be free. And ring."

In the cobalt dark, beneath a drowned city, beside the last note of the makers' instrument, with her brother's terrified eyes on her and the gold gone cold at her hand and a billionaire's voice in her ear offering her the gladdest, freest-*looking,* most coerced choice in the history of the world, Layla turned, in the silt-haze, in the dive-light, and looked at Ben.

And Ben — who had measured the door, who had grounded every single step of the way down, who had handed her, at every node from the Khan to here, not false comfort but a true and checkable thing to stand on — looked back at her through the dark water.

He did not nod.

He did not shake his head.

He did not point at Tarek, or at Roeg's divers, or up toward the boats and the air and the man with all the money in the world and the one wound he'd never let anyone measure. He did not tell her what to do, because the one thing she could not be, the one thing the whole drowned machine would not accept, was *told.*

His hand was unsteady. He saw it shake in the cone of light and clamped down on it, the engineer's reflex, *steady the instrument,* and brought the gauge up anyway — checked it, stupidly, by habit, his thumb running the slide as if it could be out of true at thirty metres,

as if anything could be out of true but the man on the boat. A breath rattled out of his regulator, too many bubbles. He let it. And then he just held up the gauge.

The little steel gauge that had never once lied to him about a tolerance. He held it up in the cone of his dive-light so she could see it, so she could see *it,* and nothing else, the thing that was only and ever true.

And the gauge said the only thing he had ever fully trusted it to say, the thing he could not say himself without breaking the only law that mattered down here.

It doesn't measure glad, the gauge said. *It doesn't measure grateful. He needs you glad — his hired men told him so, the stone won't ring for a thing it doesn't recognise — and he thinks fear can be dressed up to look like gladness if he stands far enough away.*

It can't.

It measures one tolerance. It measures whether you're free. *You know what's coerced. You know what's bought. You've known since the long road north, since you worked out — in the back of the truck, with the desert going by — the one free reason to sound it that is only yours, that he can't buy or threaten or own, that doesn't belong to him and doesn't belong to me and doesn't even, quite, belong to Tarek.*

Find it. The only free one.

And ring.

Chapter 16 — The Voice

She went into the chamber.

There was a way in — there had always been a way in, the makers had cut it, a portal in the rock below the drowned city that the disc had known and her body knew. She finned down toward it through the cobalt dark, the dive-light at her temple raking across fallen colossi as she passed: a granite face the size of a car, lips parted, eyes worn smooth by five thousand years of slow water; a forearm thicker than her whole body, lying where it had lain since the sea took Thonis-Heracleion; a temple lintel canted in the silt with hieroglyphs still crisp enough to read. The water was cold even through the suit. Tarek's eyes were on her — she could feel them, her brother's terror like a second pressure on her skin — and Roeg's voice was in her ear, oiled and steady and close, *that's it, that's it, walk into the door, you're doing beautifully,* and a warmth was rising in her hands, the soft answering heat she had stopped fearing somewhere between Giza and Aswan.

She passed out of the open water into the chamber itself.

And even through the terror, even through the trap closing around her like a fist, the wonder took her — because the chamber was the most beautiful thing she had ever been inside, and she had been inside the Great Pyramid.

It was vast and it was tuned. She understood that the instant she was in it, in her body, a thing she simply *was*. The walls had been cut to the optical perfection of the Serapeum boxes, the flatness Ben

had proven with a feeler gauge and a flashlight and a shop quote that said *we can't do this* — but on the scale of the pyramid, a single enormous resonant cavity flooded to the ceiling with the sea. And running through it, veining the floor and the high cut walls and the impossibly squared corners, the tuned gold: the conductive medium, the thing that coupled this drowned chamber across the entire floor of an ocean to its twin off the coast of India, to a woman named Meena who had read it and handed the bearing forward without ever seeing this, without ever knowing the relay needed a *voice*.

The whole of it was *waiting*.

The way the fragment behind dirty glass had waited, the mountain in the dawn light, the boxes in the breathing dark of Saqqara. But enormously — the entire instrument, the whole continent-spanning, five-thousand-year-old message, all of it gathered and poised and silent and aimed, somehow, *outward*. At the sky. At the dark. At whoever the makers had built it across an entire world to speak to.

Waiting for the one thing it had ever needed.

A voice.

Hers.

"*Now,* Layla," said Roeg, and the gloss came off the word as it crossed the comm — the want naked under it now, the small frightened boy who had decided, somewhere in a life she would never know, that the only safety was *mine*. "Sound it. I'll be honest — you've earned honest. Your brother's at six hundred PSI and dropping. The moment it rings — the *moment* I hear it — he goes up. I promise you that." His voice softened, and the softness was the worst of it. "I'm not a monster. Whatever Ben's told you. I'm a man who knows what a thing is worth." A beat. "Just *be glad,* Layla. You get to save your brother *and* hear the gods. How many people get that? Sound it. Now."

And here it was, fully closed — the trap, the gladdest-looking choice in the world. Ring it to save Tarek. Walk to the wall, put her hands on the tuned gold, let her love for her brother pour through her like the

river, sound the instrument, save his life — and hand the most valuable thing on Earth to a man who thought people were things you bought.

She put her hands on the wall.

And she did exactly what Roeg wanted.

She thought of Tarek. His terrified eyes behind the mask, twenty metres off across the chamber mouth. The boy who measured time in cigarettes and teased her about the men she didn't bring home, who had hauled her out of the river when they were children and never once let her forget it. Her brother. Her family. The Khan. The brass trays under her cloth, the smell of metal polish, the whole ordinary life she was about to lose and the brother she was about to save — and she let it fill her up, the love and the fear and the desperate gladness of *I can save him, I just have to ring,* and she pushed all of it into the tuned gold under her palms and *reached* for the note, for the coupling, the way she had reached for the fragment and the mountain and the boxes —

and the stone went cold.

She felt it go. She felt it like a door closing, like a hand let go in the dark. The gold under her hands, which had been warm, which had been *glad,* went cold and dead and silent. And the chamber, which had been poised and aimed at the sky, *withdrew* — the way the cracked obelisk at Aswan had withdrawn under her hands, a broken fork that won't ring no matter how true the strike. The great gathered five-thousand-year silence stayed silent. And Layla knelt in the flooded dark with her hands on cold gold and understood, in her body, the thing Ben had measured for her in the dust behind a visitor centre, the thing she had nodded at and not yet believed:

It isn't measuring whether I'm glad. It's measuring whether I'm free. A choice made to save Tarek, with a knife at his throat, is the most coerced choice there is. He's holding my brother. So it's bought. So it's cold. *Ben was right. Ben is always right about tolerances.*

"Why isn't it—" Roeg's voice cracked across the comm, the gloss en-

tirely gone now, the fear bare and ugly and very young. “Ben. *Ben.* You said the channels would light. Why isn’t it ringing. She’s *trying.* I can see her, she’s right there, she’s *trying* — make it work, you measured it, make it—”

And Ben’s voice came back into the dark water, into Layla’s ear, and it was steady, and it was certain, and it was the proudest she had ever heard him. An engineer reading a tolerance no one alive could argue with.

“Twelve channels flat,” Ben said, slow, hammering each word like Tarek at the bench. “Nothing. Zero across the board. You want the reading? There isn’t one. That’s the reading.” A breath, in the dark. “She’s trying to ring it to save her brother. Under your knife. For *you.* And the meter says that’s not a free voice. Won’t couple. Won’t lift a needle. Checked it twice.” His voice rang in the water now, thirty metres down, and Layla could hear the wet edge of him under it, the man who had wept in a felucca over a number. “You found the currency. So *proud* of finding it — the brother, the gauge, the leverage. Thought you’d cracked it. But the second you put a price on her, Caspian, you zeroed it out. Every channel. It’s not philosophy. It’s in the *stone.* And the makers built this thing so that it will *only ever sound for a voice nobody owns.*”

“You’re lying. Your meter’s lying. Recalibrate it—”

“Send the boy up, Caspian,” Ben said, his voice dropping low and level. “It’s over. Over the second you grabbed him. You didn’t lose to me. You beat yourself.”

A silence. A long one, in the cold dark, thirty metres down. Layla counted her own breaths into it, three, four, watching the dead gold under her hands and not lifting them.

And then Roeg did the thing that men like him always do at the end — the thing that is their defeat and not their victory. He reached for force, because force was all he had left.

“*Then she does it cold,*” he snarled, and the charm was gone now,

the Zorg-grin she had glimpsed across a candlelit table in Cairo curdled to a child's tantrum with a sovereign fortune behind it. "Diver three. The boy's regulator. On my mark. Layla — listen — ten seconds. Ring it, or I take his air, and we find out together whether you ring it then. Let's see how *free* you feel watching him drown. Ten. Nine—"

And that —

that —

was the moment Layla found it.

Because Roeg, in his rage, in his certainty, in his small terrified need to be obeyed, had just handed her the one thing she had been hunting up the entire long road north — Giza, Saqqara, the felucca, the desert, the closed border, all of it — and she did not have a word for it yet, only the sudden certainty that the cold dead stone under her hands and the knife at her brother's throat were the same wrongness, and that the way out was not the one Roeg was screaming at her to take.

She took her hands off the cold gold.

She turned in the flooded dark, away from the wall, away from Roeg's voice counting down in her ear, and she looked through the water at her brother. At Tarek — nineteen, terrified, a stranger's gloved hand on his regulator hose, his eyes finding hers across the silt-bloom and *holding,* the way they had held when they were children in the river. And she did not reach for the note to save him.

That was the trap. That was the cold stone. She had tried it, and it had stayed dead, and now she understood why with her whole body.

Instead she looked *past* him — up, and out, at the whole impossible drowned thing. The fallen city. The toppled gods. The tuned gold veining the dark. The five-thousand-year-old message poised and aimed at the sky. And it came up through her not as words but as heat in the chest, the way the warmth had risen in her hands all down the river — the background girl, the one things didn't happen to, the one who wrapped other people's beautiful things in cloth and went home in the

dark — and a thing older than writing had reached across the floor of an ocean and been *glad I was born,* and had waited, all this way, all these nodes, not for Roeg, not for a scholar, not — *God forgive me* — even for Tarek.

For her.

Roeg counting in her ear. *Not for you.* Tarek's eyes across the silt. *Not even for you, little brother — I love you, that's exactly why I can't.* The thought of doing it for any of them went cold under her like the stone had, and she let it go.

For me. Because I want to.

And Layla — of Cairo, of the Khan, restorer of brass trays, daughter of a man who worked the digs, the most important person on the surface of the earth and an ordinary girl, both true, both at once — Layla smiled in the cobalt dark. A free smile. A glad smile. *Her* smile. And she lifted her hands — not to the wall, but open, wide, palms out to the whole drowned waiting instrument — and she *chose,* the way the light chooses, every single time, to go on being itself —

and she rang.

The chamber answered.

It was not a note. It was *every* note — the whole instrument, the entire continent, five thousand years of patient tuned silence sounding all at once. She felt the resonance take the chamber, the tuned gold conducting it along its veins, the pressure of it racing wall to wall, floor to high cut ceiling, the squared corners where the resonance peaked driving a tremor through the water she could feel against her skin. The walls sang. The drowned city rang. The great granite faces in the silt shed their cladding of disturbed sediment as the stone shook, the parted lips and worn-smooth eyes seeming to surface from the murk as the silt lifted away — and a chord rose so vast and so beautiful and so *true* that it was felt as much as heard, in the bones, in the water, in the blood, a pressure-wave that went *up,* out of the chamber and out of the sea and up through the dark, aimed at the sky, at whoever, at

whatever the makers had built it across an entire world to speak to.

The divers' lamps caught it — the whole flooded city raked suddenly bright, every fallen face thrown into hard relief as the lights swung in startled hands and the vibration set the silt blooming and turning in the beams, so that for a moment the water itself seemed to move with the sound. Tarek's terrified eyes went wide — not with fear now, with *wonder,* his mask full of swinging light, the diver's hand forgotten on his hose. Roeg's men floated frozen and forgotten in the trembling water, their weapons drifting on their lanyards, gaping at a thing no money could ever hold. And Ben van Kerk, thirty metres down with the meter clutched in both hands, watched every channel not pin but *sing* — twelve needles, all of them, climbing together off the floor for the first time, the most beautiful reading of his entire life, real and measured and undeniable — and wept openly into his mask, because it was true, and he had measured it, and it was *hers*. Entirely hers. Given freely. Owned by no one alive.

And Layla, at the centre of the gold, at the centre of the song, at the centre of the most beautiful thing that had ever happened, heard — for one moment, one single moment she would never be able to describe to anyone, not Ben, not anyone, for the rest of her life — heard what the makers had built it across an ocean to say.

And she would never tell.

That was hers too. The one free voice in five thousand years heard the message, and it was hers, and some things you do not sell and do not surrender and do not even share. Some things you simply *carry* — awake, on your own two feet, forever.

She lowered her hands.

The chord faded, vast and slow, up into the dark, on its long way to wherever it had always been going. The resonance ebbed in the veins, the tremor in the water dying away, until the chamber was only stone and sea again, and the dive-lights again, and her own breath loud in her ears.

And in the ringing silence after, in the cobalt dark, she turned to the diver still holding her brother. Her chest was heaving. She wanted to be sick, and she wanted to laugh, and she wanted Tarek up and breathing and out of that man's hands more than she had ever wanted anything.

"It's done," she said, into the comm, to all of them. Her voice shook. "It was always mine. Now let my brother go — get him up, *now*."

Chapter 17 — A Man, in the End

Here is the thing about being thirty metres underwater when everything happens at once: Ben van Kerk would spend the rest of his life trying to put the next four minutes in order, and would fail, the same way Layla had failed to order the chase through the Khan, and for the same reason. It came back to him in colour. Gold, and then cobalt, and then a single thread of red.

He had her acoustic signature on the meter strapped to his forearm — the chord, the full chord, the one the makers had drowned this chamber to carry — and the readout had spiked and held and *resolved*, a sine so clean it shouldn't exist in nature, water and stone and tuned gold all ringing at once across an ocean floor that joined this dark to a dark off the coast of India. He had measured the impossible. It was on his wrist. It was *true*. And then the chord faded — not cut, not stopped, only allowed to settle the way a struck bell settles, the energy bleeding back out into the patient sea — and the instrument went quiet.

And in the silence after the most beautiful sound in the history of the world, Caspian Roeg — in his warm dry boat, watching his screen, having heard the wonder of the age ring *for someone else, for free, for a reason he could never buy* — came apart.

"*No,*" he said, on the comm, and it was not a billionaire's voice, it was a child's, the voice of a small boy who has been told no by the

one thing he wanted most. “No. No, that’s — that’s *mine*. I found it. I funded — every metre of water you’re floating in, I *paid* for—”

Ben turned in the dark. Thirty metres down, the dive-lights swung and the colossal faces of the drowned gods slid through the silt, stone eyes the size of doors, and below them the gold seams in the chamber wall were still dimming from white to amber to nothing, the last of the chord cooling out of the metal. He found Layla in the beam. She was hanging in the water beside the broken throne of some sunken king, both hands open, palms still raised toward the wall she had just woken — and on his wrist the meter had gone flat. Quiet. A chamber that answered a free voice and now answered nothing.

“—diver three,” Roeg was saying, faster now, the words tumbling, “diver three, *take the boy’s air*. Take it. If it’ll ring for *her* it’ll ring for *me,* I’ll *make* it ring, I’ll make it — everything has a — *everything has a price—*”

Ben heard Layla’s gasp through the comm. He saw her turn in the water, saw the beam of her own light whip across the dark to find Tarek — her brother, nineteen, a boy who fixed museum trays beside her, who had no business in this cobalt nightmare and had come anyway because she had — and saw diver three hanging at Tarek’s shoulder, one gloved hand already drifting toward the boy’s regulator.

“*Tarek—*” Layla’s voice cracked the water open. She was already moving, finning hard, and Ben was moving too, and Jakobus’s voice was flat and fast in his ear from the surface — *hold, hold your ascent, do not panic-rise* — and none of it would be fast enough, none of them would reach the boy in time, thirty metres was thirty metres and a regulator was a regulator and—

And diver three stopped.

Ben saw it happen and did not, at first, believe it. The hand had been moving. The order had been given. The man was a professional, a hired gun in neoprene, paid to guard a chamber and apparently now to drown a nineteen-year-old, and he had every reason in the world to

do it. And in the dive-light his masked face turned, slow, toward the boy, and then up, toward the dimming gold on the chamber wall — and Ben understood, watching, that diver three had been in the water for the chord. That he had floated here in the cobalt dark and felt a five-thousand-year-old sound sing up through the bones of his own legs, and had wept inside his own mask, the way every one of them had wept, the way you weep when something you did not know you were starving for finally arrives.

The hand came off the boy. Both hands came up, palms open — the exact gesture Layla had made to the whole instrument, the open-handed *here, I ask nothing* — and on the comm, quietly, in Arabic, to no one and to everyone, diver three said: "*La.*"

No.

"Not for a man who is not even in the water," he said.

And then the strangest thing Ben van Kerk had ever witnessed, stranger than the chord, stranger than the gold, because the chord was physics and this was *people*: the other divers, one by one, in the dark, drew back from Tarek. Diver four lifted off. Diver two killed his grip on the boy's tank and let go and finned a slow metre into the open water, and put his own hands up, palms out, and said nothing at all, because nothing needed saying. Five hired men, in the cold and the dark, each having heard the same five-thousand-year-old sound, declining — freely, one at a time — to be owned.

It was over. Just like that. Not with a fight. With five men choosing.

Roeg had brought force, real force, men and gear and a fortune's worth of reach — and force, at the last, put its hands up and floated free of him, and there was nothing left in the water to fight.

They got Tarek to the surface slow and careful, because you cannot rush a frightened boy up from thirty metres no matter what your blood is screaming. The controlled ascent. The safety stops. The methodical,

checkable, hands-and-training procedure of it — and Ben, who reached for a number whenever he was afraid, had never in his life been so grateful for a procedure, because it was *grounded*, it was right and slow and correct, a thing you did properly with your body while your heart was still ringing with a sound it would never recover from. Five metres. Three. The light went green, then gold, then the broken silver lid of the surface tilted overhead.

Layla held her brother the whole way up, one hand fisted in the strap of his BCD, never letting go, her eyes on his mask the entire ascent. On the surface, Jakobus and Nadia took the divers' surrender with the flat professional courtesy of people who had done this before — no triumph, no gloating, just hands and lines and *up you come, easy now, give me the tank* — and the hired men came aboard one after another and sat, soaked and quiet, and one of them, the one who had said *la,* sat apart and looked back at the water for a long time.

And Caspian Roeg—

Caspian Roeg was sitting alone in the stern of his beautiful boat when the police launches came. The ones Dalia had been arranging across three phones since Aswan; the Egyptian authorities that Hagg Yusuf's forty years of patient, careful network had finally, finally woken. The launches came in low and unhurried across the pewter water, blue light turning on the chop, and Roeg watched them come and he did not run, and he did not fight, and that was the part that stayed with Ben afterward — the part that made the man, at the end, exactly what he had always secretly been under all that gloss: not a monster. A person. Fallible. Frightened. Defeated by his own fear, and almost — *almost* — pitiable.

Ben climbed across onto Roeg's boat. He didn't have to. Nadia gave him a look that said *don't,* and Jakobus gave him a look that said nothing at all, which from Jakobus meant *your call.* Ben went anyway. He wanted to look at the man one more time, now that it was over.

Roeg looked up at him. The gloss was entirely gone — the easy charm, the showman's panache, the dark-twin glitter that had made

the academy look foolish and had nearly, in a tunnel under the desert, made Ben say yes. What was left was just a tired, frightened, very rich man who had spent his whole life building a fortress out of the word *mine* and had just watched the single thing he wanted most refuse him in a language he would never learn to speak.

"It really won't ring for me." Roeg sounded, mostly, bewildered, a man reading a result on an instrument he had built and could not believe. "I have more money than God. I funded the science — *your* science, Ben. The scans. The metrology. The lab time you could never afford. I believed you before you believed yourself; you were a joke and a clip and a millionaire crank and I *believed* you." His voice thinned. "And I love it. That part I'm not lying about. Whatever else I am. I've loved the wonder my whole life." The crack came then, small and terrible. "So why a girl who fixes *trays*. And not me."

"Because she doesn't want to own it," Ben said. He heard how clean that sounded, how much like a line, and it embarrassed him; he looked down at the meter on his wrist instead of at Roeg. "That's the readout, anyway. That's the part I can prove. The rest I'm reaching for and I don't have the words, so." He turned the screen so the man could see it, the flat dead line where the chord had been. "It's on my meter if you want to check it." He crouched down so he was level with the man, not unkindly, because Hagg Yusuf had taught him something about that too — that you can be right and gentle in the same breath, and that the second is what makes the first worth anything. "You want to *have* it. She —" he stopped. " — she just wants to hear it. And the tolerance is fine enough the stone can tell those two apart. That's the function. That's what the flatness is *for*. You offered her the world, under the pyramid. And the answer that just registered on my wrist is that she doesn't have a price."

"Everyone has a price." Roeg said it fast, almost desperate, the way a man grabs the one rail he's stood on his whole life. "Everyone. You're telling me a girl who fixes trays for a wage walked away from *me*. No. There's a number. There's always — I've never once met the — there's a number, I just didn't find it—"

"There isn't." Ben let a breath go. "That was your mistake. Old one, too. Older than you, older than the dynasty. They caught it before any of us were born and built a machine that fails the second you try to buy it." A breath. "Look. The stone you can have. You've got the money — buy the whole bay, the boats, the divers, the silt. The *sound* you can't. That's not a moral, that's just what it does." His own voice was not steady, and he didn't bother to make it. "I almost said yes to you. In the desert. For one second I wanted the room full of serious people so badly I could taste it. I wanted to *own* being right. So I'm not better than you. I just got shown the difference in time. You didn't."

He stood. The police launch bumped the hull.

Roeg said nothing. The officers came aboard with their careful courtesy and their cuffs and a quiet word in two languages, and Roeg let them, and the last Ben saw of him — before he turned away across the gap between the boats — the richest man in the world was staring out across the pewter water at the place where, far below, a wonder he had spent a fortune to find and would never, ever own, lay dimming back into its patient dark.

And his face, for the first time, was not a collector's.

It was a child's. One who has finally, completely, been told no — and is beginning, far too late, to understand why.

They sat on the deck of Nadia's boat in the late afternoon, all of them, soaked and emptied and impossibly alive, with the brown shore of Alexandria going gold in the westering light and the gulls wheeling and Tarek wrapped in three blankets and refusing to let go of his sister's hand. Nobody talked for a long time. There was nothing to say that the chord hadn't already said better, and they all knew it, and so they let the silence be the conversation. Jakobus sat against the gunwale with his shades up for once, eyes on the water, the desert protocol of a man who keeps the watch even when the watch is over. Hagg Yusuf had his face turned to the light. Dalia had finally put all three phones

down.

Layla reached over and pressed her palm to the back of Tarek's hand, checking it for cold under the blankets, and he let her, and did not let go.

Ben sat next to Layla. Their shoulders touched. He did not move his, and neither did she.

"You heard it," he said finally. Quietly. He had watched her face, down there, in the gold, in the half-second the chord resolved — had seen something move across it that was not surprise and not fear but *recognition,* the way you recognise a voice you have known your whole life and only now place. "At the end. You heard what it says."

"Yes," Layla said.

"Going to tell me?"

She looked out at the gold water, at the place where the most beautiful thing in the world lay quiet now under the sea, drowned by design, sounded once and content. She smiled — the free smile, the one that was only hers, the one no one had ever managed to put a price on — and she leaned her head, just slightly, against the shoulder of the man with the ruler.

"No," she said.

And Ben van Kerk — engineer, crank, prophet, fool; the man who had spent his entire life needing to measure everything, needing to *know,* needing to drag every wonder up into the light and pin it to a number on a page where the academy could not pretend it away — Ben van Kerk waited for the old reflex, the one that always came, the hand already half-reaching for the meter, the number that would make the not-knowing bearable. It did not come. He noticed it the way you notice a sound has stopped — by the quiet where it used to be. He let his breath out slow, and looked at the water instead of the screen, and his shoulders came down off his ears for what felt like the first time in a decade.

"Okay," he said. And meant it. And put his arm around her in the gold light, and let the wonder be hers, and stay a mystery, and ring on, somewhere out under the patient sea — for no one's profit and everyone's keeping, exactly the way it had been built to.

"Okay," said Layla, and held on.

The boat turned for shore. Behind them, the sea kept its secret. And somewhere far below, the makers' instrument lay quiet again in the dark — not switched off, not owned, not solved — only *sounded,* once, by a free voice, the way it had waited five thousand years to be.

Content, the way a thing is content when it has finally, after all that waiting, been *heard*.

Chapter 18 — What We Carry

Three months later, Ben van Kerk went back on a podcast — not the biggest one on Earth, a smaller one, a serious one, a science one with forty thousand listeners instead of thirty million — and did the single most damaging thing to his own fame that a famous man can do.

He told the truth, carefully, and refused to make it bigger than it was.

The studio was a converted box-room in a university media building, foam wedges on the walls, two mugs gone cold between them. The host was younger than Ben and visibly nervous, the way people got around him now, hungry for the clip that would run for a week, and he leaned across the little table with his eyes already lit.

"So the Serapeum boxes," he said. "You've been. You've measured them. Walk me through it — are they impossible? Did aliens—"

"They're not impossible," Ben said. "Nothing's impossible. They're *astonishing,* which is better, and more honest."

He saw the disappointment cross the kid's face, the chyron dying before it was born, and he felt the old reflex rise — give them the gasp, give them the thing that travels, you know how to do this, you've done it ten thousand times — and he let it go past him like a car he wasn't going to chase.

"The interior surfaces are flat to optical-reference tolerances," he went on, slower now, "and the inside corners are squared sharper than a spinning tool can make them, and I can show you the survey data, and the best granite shop on Earth quoted me *we cannot do this,* in writing, with a date on it. And I think the most parsimonious read is that they're inherited — older than the dynasty that revered them and used them." He picked up the cold mug, put it down again. "But I want to be really clear about something."

He looked into the camera. He was not grinning. For a decade the grin had done his arguing for him, the populist outsider's wink that said *we both know, don't we,* and he found he had retired it without deciding to, somewhere on a road north of Aswan, and forty thousand serious people leaned in toward a man who had stopped performing.

"I don't know who made them. Nobody does, and anyone who tells you they do is selling you something." He stopped. Started again. "And the — look. The thing I got wrong. The ancient Egyptians who *found* them, and built three thousand years of civilisation around them, that's not the lesser part of this. That's the —" He made a flat gesture with one hand, like leveling a surface. "You inherit a mountain. You don't sell the mountain. You don't even fully understand the mountain. You spend three thousand years building temples on it and writing your names on it like a prayer and you tend it. That's not less. The data says it's not less." He breathed. "I spent ten years getting that wrong. I let people hear *they couldn't* when I said *they didn't,* because *they couldn't* was the version that made me famous, and I'm done. The wonder's real. The mystery's real. And it belongs to Egypt, and to everyone, and to nobody who wants to own it."

The host had stopped writing notes. "That's — I mean, you understand that's a less exciting answer than—"

"Than aliens. Yes." A beat. "Less fun without them. Truer, though. And true's about all I've got left that's worth anything."

The clip did not go viral.

A few of the old crowd called him a sellout, a coward, *they got to him.* A man with two million followers made a forty-minute video about how Ben van Kerk had been compromised, and the comments agreed, and Ben read about a third of it on his phone at a bus stop in Cape Town and then put the phone in his pocket and watched the traffic and felt, to his own surprise, almost nothing. The cage had been shaped like a triumph for so long that he'd mistaken the bars for walls. They were only ever bars. You could put the phone in your pocket and they didn't follow.

Three weeks later a journal he had been frozen out of for a decade ran a short, careful, peer-reviewed paper on the metrology of the Serapeum interiors, measured to a standard no one could argue with. The masthead did not say *van Kerk.* He had asked that it not — had walked into the editor's office in Cairo with a hard drive and a flat refusal, *put your people's names on it, not mine,* — and the editor, an exhausted woman who had spent fifteen years defending consensus against exactly his kind of man, had looked at the data for a long time and then up at him and said, *you understand this vindicates you,* and Ben had said, *only if it's yours,* and meant it, and watched her finally understand that he meant it.

The data was theirs now. A wonder kept and handed on, not a trophy held.

A quiet old professor who had once stood at a conference and called him a clown, to laughter, to applause, sent him a two-line email that said only: *I was wrong about you, and about the boxes. Thank you for the data — and for giving it away.*

Ben read it twice, at his kitchen table in a flat at the bottom of Africa, and then he forwarded it to Layla with no message, because she would understand, and she did, and texted back a single brass-tray emoji and a heart, and Ben van Kerk laughed out loud in an empty room — except that it didn't feel empty anymore.

Layla kept fixing trays.

This surprised everyone except Hagg Yusuf, who had known all along, and had said so, the morning she came back to the Khan — had simply looked up from his glass of tea as she ducked under the lintel into the eight-foot shop that went back into the dark like a throat, and nodded once, as if she'd stepped out for bread, and gone back to his tea.

She picked up the planishing hammer. The felt was where it had always been. The dented hundred-year-old ewer was still in the corner where she'd left it before any of it, before the museum, before the basalt that answered, before a man with a ruler crossed an ocean and a man with a fortune tried to buy the bottom of the sea. She turned the ewer in the lamplight, found the bruise in the metal, set it on the stake, and brought the hammer down, and the old sure music started up again under her hands — *tink, tink, tink* — the small certain thing, and she felt her shoulders come down from around her ears for the first time in months.

The hammer knew the weight on its own. Her hands knew it. She let them have it, and did not think about the bottom of the sea, and the ewer came true under the lamp the way it always had.

Tarek told everyone at the café that his sister was a secret agent. Nobody believed him. He didn't seem to mind; he'd say it grandly, sweep his arm at the men over their backgammon, *my sister, the agent, she has been to the bottom of the sea on government business,* and they'd laugh and pour him more tea, and he'd grin and let them think it was a joke, which, Layla thought, watching him from across the café one evening, was its own kind of carrying. He had stopped measuring time in cigarettes, mostly. Since the water. He didn't talk about the water. Neither did she. But sometimes she'd catch him standing very still in a doorway, breathing, just breathing, the way a man does who has remembered he can, and she would go and stand next to him until it passed.

The Order kept the chamber. That was the vow, and they kept it

— quietly, carefully, with the Egyptian antiquities people and the real marine archaeologists who had been mapping that bay for thirty years and Hagg Yusuf's forty-year network of caretakers and divers and men who knew which official to call. The site logged. Protected. Studied openly. The wonder neither buried nor sold — the most valuable thing on Earth kept for everyone and owned by no one, exactly as Layla had said in the dark, with a man's hand on her arm and the dive-lights raking the colossal sunken faces.

It was always mine, she'd said down there, *now let my brother go.* And then she had given it away. All of it. To everyone.

Caspian Roeg's lawyers were very good, and money is money, and in the end he did not go to an Egyptian prison.

He went home. To the fortress of *mine* he had built himself at the top of the world, a free man and a defeated one, almost-pitiable, which was worse, Layla thought, than any cell — and she knew this because she had tried, on the road north, watching the dunes, to hate him, and had found, to her great inconvenience, that she couldn't.

Because she had felt it too. In the museum, the first time, before she knew anything: the warmth coming up out of the cold basalt, the impossible note, the feeling of being *recognised by an object* — and underneath the wonder of it, sharp and shameful, the other thing. The thing Roeg lived inside. *You are valuable. You are the only one. You are wanted at your true price.* She had felt the pull of being the most important person in the room and not believing it and then, God help her, for one second, *wanting* to believe it. She did not like remembering that. She and Roeg had stood in the same doorway, was the thing; she had no idea, even now, what had walked her back out of it and not him. An old keeper, maybe, who'd treated her grandmother's hands like a thing worth listening to. A man with a ruler who kept handing her the choice when another man would have named the price. Luck. Timing. She turned it over and it would not come clean.

There but for the grace, her grandmother would have said. She hoped, distantly, genuinely, with no particular expectation, that some-

day he learned to love a thing without caging it.

It was the only way it ever sang. He, of all people, ought to have known. He had heard it go silent in his own hands.

Jakobus Swart came to the Khan to say goodbye, and for the first and only time since Layla had known him, she heard him coming.

She heard it before she understood it — a low German purr threading up the lane between the spice stalls where no car had any business being, slow, patient, parting the crowd the way water parts around a stone, and she came out under the lintel wiping her hands and stopped.

It was a Mercedes. Old — ten, twelve years — but the kind of old that had been the best thing on any road the year it was built, a long black coupé polished to a depth you could fall into, sitting in the filth and clamour of the Khan like a panther asleep in a chicken yard. Three small chrome letters on the flank that she did not know the meaning of and Ben, materialising at her shoulder, plainly did, because he made a sound. *AMG.* And under the gloss, if you knew to look — and she had learned, on this road, to look — the small wrong-right things: the exhausts a fraction too fat, the brakes behind the wheels a size that did not match the badge, a low purposeful crouch to the way it sat on its springs. *Some small tweaks,* she would learn he called them, in the flat voice he used for closing subjects.

And on it, a vanity plate — the kind a Gulf state will sell a man who wants to name his own car — that read, in blocky Latin letters, **HAMMER II.** Ben made the second small sound, the one that meant a thing had landed even harder than the first. Layla looked at him. "*Der Hammer,*" he said, almost reverent, to the car and not to her. "There was a Mercedes, back in the eighties — looked exactly like somebody's grandfather's saloon, and AMG dropped an engine in it that ate Ferraris on the autobahn, and the people who *knew* called it the Hammer, and everybody else just saw a grandfather's car." He shook his head, slow. "*The Hammer* was the first one. The original lie-about-itself." He

looked at the plate again, and the slow grin started. "And he's gone and called this one the *second*. Like it's the next in a line only about four people on earth would know existed. Same joke as the truck, same as…" and he didn't finish, but Layla finished it for herself, looking at the man by the door: *same as him*. The plate was not a boast — or it was, but a boast pitched so that the only people who could hear it were the ones who already knew, which made it the opposite of a boast. It was the joke he had been telling with his whole life — *here is exactly what I am, the second of a secret breed, stamped on the outside in letters you will read straight past* — and only a man like Ben, who knew the first, would ever catch that there was supposed to be a second, which was the entire point.

And leaning on the open door of it, in the copper-light, was Jakobus — *shaved*. Beard gone close to the jaw, the grey trimmed clean. Wearing what she slowly recognised as his own clothes, the same brown-olive-khaki field clothes he'd worn the whole way up the continent, but laundered now, pressed, the cleanest of his dirty shirts buttoned and worn the way a man wears an Armani suit to a wedding — with a straight back and a quiet pride and not one shred of self-consciousness. And on his face, pushed up into the trimmed hair, not the scuffed wraparound shades but a *new* pair: gold-rimmed, expensive, a half-step over the top, the sunglasses of a man who had decided, exactly once, to be a little bit ridiculous and to enjoy it all the way down.

And on his thigh — Layla saw it and felt the small private ache of a thing understood — a knife again. Not the kukri; the kukri was gone, given to a desert and a debt and never coming back, and a man like Jakobus did not replace a thing like that with another like it, because there was no other like it and pretending otherwise would have been an insult to the one he'd given away. This was a plain bush knife, full-tang, honest working steel in a new sheath not yet gone dark with handling, the kind of blade you buy in any outfitter on any continent and wear until it becomes yours. A tool, not a treasure. He had armed the next leg of the road the way he did everything — sufficiently, without sentiment,

and without trying to recreate the thing that could not be recreated. The decoy was back on his hip. The special one was a story he now carried only in the telling.

He was grinning. Not the dry quarter-smile she'd had to learn to read for. The whole thing — the biggest, most shameless, schoolboy-with-a-new-bicycle grin she had ever seen on a grown man, the grin of a boy who had wanted a thing his whole life and had finally, somehow, got it.

"Where is the Beast?" she asked — *the Beast,* she'd heard him call the Cruiser once, in the dark, the way you say a friend's name. "Your truck."

"Getting a new heart." The grin didn't move. "Full rebuild. New motor, the works — she earned it, and it's costing me a kidney, and she's worth every cent and then some." He patted the black flank of the Mercedes the way you'd settle a nervous horse. "So I called in a few things people owed me. From a long time ago. From a lot of places." A beat, and something flickered under the joy — the iceberg, the depth of it — and was gone again into the grin. "Turns out I'm owed more than I ever bother to remember. This was the dream car. Twenty years I've wanted one of these. The man who had it owed me his life, more or less, and was glad to be asked."

Ben, who could not help himself, asked the engineer's question. "Who does the motor?"

And for the first time all evening something in Jakobus's face went *soft* in a way that had nothing to do with Layla or the goodbye — the particular softness of a man speaking about another man he loves. "There's an oke in Paarl," he said. "Fishes more than he works, which is exactly backwards from how good he is. Can't spell his own surname — letters swim on him, always have — and he reads an engine the way I read a room: whole, at a glance, the whole thing at once, where the trouble is before you've finished telling him there's trouble. The Beast's a four-point-two straight-six — the Cruiser six, the one they built to never die — and here's the thing most people get backwards.

They think you make a truck like that fast by bolting power onto it. You don't. You *start* by making it perfect. He blueprinted her first — took her down to the last bolt and built her back up truer than Toyota ever managed on the line: every clearance exact, every con-rod and piston *weighed* and matched so there's not a gram of argument anywhere in her when she spins. You know what he weighs the parts on? Not a lab balance. A *painter's scale* — the little analogue thing you mix paint by, costs what a good lunch costs. Most precise work I've ever seen done by a human hand, on a scale you'd step over in a hardware shop." He shook his head, fond and a little awed. "And *then,* on top of a bottom end that true — once he knew she'd hold whatever he asked — he gave her the lot. Everything you can physically do to a diesel and have it live. The head flowed and ported till she breathes like she wants to. Forced air, fed cold. A free exhaust that lets it all back out. A little brain from the boys in Cape Town to time the whole conversation. Two new Land Cruisers, that build cost me, near enough — all of it spent on the parts you can't see, in a shell that looks like it's going to the scrapyard." The grin came back, but quieter. "Same as everything, hey. The best thing in the room, wearing the clothes of the most ordinary. He taught me half of what I know about keeping a thing alive in the bush with whatever's in your hand. The other half I stole off him while he wasn't looking."

Ben said nothing, because there was nothing to add to that, and because he had just been handed — sideways, in a spice lane in Cairo — the whole engineering creed of the man and the man who made him, and you do not step on a thing like that.

And Layla understood, standing in the spice-dust with the panther purring at the kerb, a thing about him she had not had a name for until now: that this man was *wealthy* — wealthy past the soft belly and the bad shirts and the rust-eaten truck, wealthy in a way no bank held, in favours and debts and the lives of men in a dozen countries who would empty their garage and call it a privilege — and that the currency he was rich in was, at times, on certain roads, worth a great deal more than a gold coin. He had simply never had the smallest interest in spending

it, until a day came when spending it was pure, uncomplicated joy, and then he had spent it like a king.

Then he straightened off the car, and the grin gentled into something else, and he came in under the lintel to say the thing he'd actually come to say, and the panther sat purring at the kerb and waited for him, and that was the only way Layla ever saw Jakobus Swart announce himself to a room — once, gladly, because he was happy, and a happy man does not need to disappear.

He accepted a glass of tea, the new shades pushed up in his hair, and looked at her work on the wall with the flat moving eyes that missed nothing.

Ben, on the stool in the back with a cold tea, had gone still in the way of a man who has learned to take this particular man's arrivals as weather — and stiller still at the gold rims and the AMG, filing it the way he filed everything, next to the truck that drank fuel like it had a grudge and overtook four lorries like fence posts, next to the kukri he'd carried a thousand kilometres and never drawn and then given away in a single unhurried motion at a desert fire, next to the cord nobody was meant to notice and the perfume that was a pyramid and the shades that came off only for power and only for love — and it all came together at once, the whole man, every separate filed-away piece of him clicking into a single shape the way a survey resolves when the last point finally lands: that there had never *been* a contradiction, that the soft belly and the bad shirt and the dismissible blade were not hiding the dangerous man, they *were* him, the same way the seam is the tray; that the gentleness and the lethality were not two things at war but one thing seen from two sides, a man who had made himself harmless-looking precisely so he would never have to be harmful, and had built his entire self as a single coherent argument that you could be the most dangerous person in any room and spend your whole life making sure nobody ever found out.

And Ben understood, sitting on a stool in a brass-light workshop in the Khan, that he had finally done the thing — that he had *grokked* the

man, all of him, in one piece, the word landing in his own head at last with the click of a tolerance closing, the word Jakobus had dropped on him a dozen times like loose change he refused to pick up, and here it was picked up, here it was *spent*. He had spent a month measuring Jakobus Swart the way he measured granite, point by point, and only now, at the goodbye, did all the points resolve into the surface they had always described. He'd never say it out loud — it was the man's word, not his — but he had it now.

And Jakobus, who missed nothing, saw him have it.

He crossed the workshop and held something out to Ben without a word about it — the multitool off his own belt, the one Ben had watched do a hundred small jobs up the river, the clip worn through to bright metal, the pliers gone smooth in the jaw from ten thousand closings. Ben looked at it and did not take it, because you do not take a working man's working tool, and Jakobus read *that* too and put it in his hand anyway, folding the fingers shut over it the way he'd folded the cloth over the gold. "You're the one who has to know how everything works," he said, low, just for Ben. "So you should carry the thing that takes everything apart and puts it back. I've got another." A beat, dry, the grey eyes level. "And it'll bug you for the rest of your life not knowing how I knew you wanted it. Good. Keeps you measuring." And that — the tool that *did* instead of *explained,* handed to the man who could not stop explaining, by a man who explained nothing — was the truest thing anyone had ever said to Ben van Kerk about himself, and it had no words in it at all that touched the matter directly, which was, he understood, the only register in which this man ever told the truth.

"You do good work," Jakobus said. He had crossed to the wall without seeming to, and stood now before the row of mended ewers, the hammered trays, the line of repaired things catching the lamp. He nodded at one — a long brass tray, an old break run clean down the centre, brought back true. He ran a thumb down the line, the way a man checks a thing he's made himself. "You can see where the wound was, if you know to look. Most people fix a thing, they polish the seam out. Lie about it." He sipped the tea. He looked at the line a moment

longer. “Mine all have the seam in them too.”

He was not, Layla understood, looking at the tray anymore.

“Where do you go now?” she asked.

Jakobus was quiet for a moment. Then he reached into his jacket and took something out — small, wrapped in a square of dark cloth — and unwrapped it on the felt, unhurried, the way he did everything, and Layla and Ben both went very still, because they knew it before they saw it.

Gold. Worked too pure. Formed to function and not to please — not coin, not bracelet, not the soft heavy ornament-gold of the museum cases. A *part*. Its surface cut with shallow channels that varied along their length the way a function varies, the way a curve has meaning, and at the centre, machined into the bright metal with a tolerance that made Ben lean off his stool without deciding to, a single shallow vector. A direction. A depth.

“Another one,” Ben breathed.

“There is always another one.” Jakobus turned it a few degrees so the lamplight ran down the channels and pooled in them, gold filling with light like a vessel with water. “Bigger than one river. You found that out yourselves — India to Egypt, across the open sea.” He looked down at the vector for a long moment, and then, almost reluctantly, lifted his eyes and turned his head south, and down, and *further* south than south had any right to go, as though he could see through the wall of the shop and the wall of the city and the curve of the whole turning world. “This came to us last month. From people who do not know what they hold.” A pause. “It points away from the warm world entirely. Down past everything. Down past where it should be possible to build.”

“Antarctica,” Ben said slowly. “Or—”

“I do not name it,” Jakobus said, mild as ever, “until I am standing on it. That is how you keep a promise. You do not announce the desti-

nation. You walk the road, and find out where it went when your boots are on it."

He folded the cloth back over the gold, corner to corner, and it disappeared into his jacket, and the lamp went a little ordinary again with it gone.

"I told someone, a long time ago, a long way south, that the road I was on ran to Egypt." Something passed behind the flat eyes — a place, a person, a debt; gone before it surfaced. "Egypt is done. The road goes on. It does that."

He stood, and pulled the sunglasses down off his head and onto his face, though it was full night and the shop was lamplit — the professional courtesy of a man sparing you his eyes, the small mercy of his trade.

"It does not need you two," he said, and there was nothing unkind in it; if anything it was the kindest thing he had ever said to either of them. "You read the river. You sounded the chamber. You kept the wonder and handed it on. That is the whole of the work. No medal at the end of it, and no more of it for you to do." He looked at Layla. "The bearing goes forward. Not the burden. The burden is the part you put *down*."

The corner of his mouth moved and was gone — the honey-badger wink.

"Rest," he said. "Fix your trays. Be people. The road has other fools."

He took the woven band off his wrist then — and Layla watched his thumbnail find the knot and the whole bracelet pay out long in his hands, the small magic she understood now, two metres of careful nothing that looked like an ornament — and he pressed the whole thing into her palm and folded her fingers over it the way he'd folded them over a gun on a boat. It smelled of the Pyramid. It smelled of him.

"There's a red strand in there," he said, flat. "Waxy. Firestarter —

bought as-is, don't let anyone tell you it's complicated. When the dark's bad and you've forgotten what you're for — light it, and remember you held a mountain and chose to put it down. Takes about ten minutes to burn. Long enough." He looked at his bare wrist once, the pale band of skin where the cord had lived, then looked at her. "The rest is load-bearing nothing. Snare line. Fishing thread. Takes twenty minutes to braid back if you need a bracelet again, which you might. Everybody should carry one true thing that looks like nothing."

She closed her hand on the cord. And because there might never be another chance to say it, and because she had spent a whole road learning to want things out loud, she said it now.

"When you've got your new heart under that bonnet," she said, nodding at the panther purring at the kerb, "you come back, and you show me Africa. Not the postcard. Yours. The real one."

And the thing happened in his face that she had only seen once, in the desert, by a fire — he *lit up,* the careful man gone clean off it for a second, and the new gold-rimmed shades went up off his face and into his hair without his seeming to decide it, the bare eyes out, because this was a thing he was not going to say from behind glass. "Ag, where do I start. The Okavango when the flood comes down out of Angola and the whole desert turns to water. *Mosi-oa-Tunya* — the smoke that thunders; you hear it an hour before you see it. The Namib at first light, those red dunes — *you'd* like the light there, you of all people." He half-laughed, almost shy of how much he meant it. "I could spend the rest of it just showing you the water."

Then the light went out of him slow, the way it leaves a hill in the evening — not a wall this time, just a sadness. "There's one place I can't take you. One. The most beautiful thing I ever stood in front of, and my face is on a list at every post on that border, has been thirty years, will be till I'm dead. Other men's wars — Angola, Sierra Leone, the Congo. The war ends; the list doesn't." The ghost of the old dryness. "Anywhere else on earth, I'll get you in. Borders are my whole trade. Just not that one — and of course it had to be behind the

prettiest thing I ever saw. The joke God plays on a man like me." He did not name it. She did not ask.

"Then bring me to the gate," she said, "and tell me what's on the other side, and I'll go in and come back and tell you whether you remembered it right."

He looked at her a long moment, the gold-rimmed shades still up in his hair, the bare eyes on her.

"Ja," he said, rough. "All right. That."

He went to the door. He paused in it, one hand on the frame, the copper-light of the Khan washing over his shoulder.

"*Sawubona,*" he said — *I see you* — to both of them. The old respect. The thing it carried under the word: *you are real to me, and I will carry that you existed, wherever I go.*

And as he turned for the car Layla saw his hands had already started — a fresh length of dun cord drawn from somewhere in the field vest, the bare wrist not bare for long, his thumbs beginning the over-and-under of a new braid without his eyes going anywhere near it, the way other men worry a coin. He would have another one done before the city let him out of it. You did not leave yourself without the one true thing that looked like nothing; you gave yours away and you made the next. She understood, watching the fingers move, that the gift had cost him nothing he couldn't remake and everything he couldn't — the object replaceable in twenty minutes, the *giving* of it not replaceable at all.

And then he folded himself down into the black coupé, and pulled the gold-rimmed shades down off his hair and onto his face, and lifted two fingers off the wheel to them through the glass — and was gone.

Not absorbed this time. Not one fish in the river. The long black car came off the kerb with a *roar* — a hard flat snarl that bounced off the close stone walls of the lane and turned every head in the Khan, a sound no showroom Mercedes had ever made, and it gathered speed

down the impossible gap in the crowd with a violence that pressed even the watchers back a half-step, and slotted into the chaos of the Cairo evening traffic at a pace that simply did not belong to the road. Ben stood in the doorway and watched it go and felt the engineer in him do the sum and refuse the answer. *That is not normal,* the sum said, flat and certain. *Not for that car. Not for that car with anything you could honestly call "a few small tweaks."* He thought of the truck that had climbed a wall of sand it had no right to climb, and he understood that the man simply did not own a single thing that was only what it looked like — that somewhere south of here the Beast was having her heart rebuilt to be more than she seemed, and that the borrowed panther was already more than it seemed, and that this was not a habit of his vehicles. It was a habit of *him.*

The taillights went red round the corner by the coppersmiths and were gone, carrying a shaved man in his cleanest dirty clothes and a direction and a depth toward the far cold bottom of the world.

Layla stood looking at the empty lane for a while.

"S*ikhona,*" she said to it, soft — *I am here.* It was the answer to the word he'd given her, the word he had handed out his whole life and always slipped away before anyone could hand it back. The doorway held its copper light and gave her nothing back, which was, she understood now, exactly his shape: to do the seeing, and be gone before it could be returned on him. She said it anyway, to where he had been. *You were real to me. I will carry that you existed, wherever I go.*

"He didn't drink half the tea," she said.

"He never does," said Ben.

Later, when the shop was dark and Tarek had gone home and the Khan had quieted to its low night hum, Ben and Layla walked up onto the roof, the way the people of the old city had walked onto their roofs for a thousand years, and stood at the parapet with the whole lit chaos of Cairo spread out below them — the minarets and the satellite dishes

and the laundry lines and the eleven million lives — and beyond it, west, against the very last of the light, the three pyramids standing on their plateau like weather, like certainty, like a thing that had been there a long time before either of them and would be perfectly fine after.

"I keep waiting to feel different," Layla said. She had her elbows on the parapet, her chin on her hands. "I rang the oldest thing in the world. I heard what it says. And then I came home and fixed a tray for a Frenchwoman, and she asked me to write down the provenance, and I did, in my good handwriting." She laughed, softly, at the size of it. "I thought it would change me more. I really did. I thought I'd come up out of that water and stop being me."

"You didn't stop being you," Ben said. "That was the point. That was the thing it was *for*."

She turned her head. He was looking at her, not at the pyramids — he had stopped looking past her at the wonder a while ago now, somewhere on the river, and she had noticed the exact moment and never told him.

"It didn't want a key," he said. "Those people could machine a key better than we ever could — they made boxes flat to a thousandth. It waited five thousand years for a *person*." He shook his head slowly, and gave up hunting for the larger way to say it, and said it plain. "A specific, particular, tray-fixing, taxi-floor-laughing, Roeg-refusing one. It was always going to be you. That's the part that rang."

Layla looked at him in the dark, at the man who measured — the one person who had handed her, at every single turn, instead of a price and instead of an answer, a *choice* — and she thought about light snapping back to straight after the chamber let it bend, how badly it had always wanted to be itself, and how she had finally understood down there in the cobalt dark that the bending was never the magic.

The *choosing to come back* was.

"You know," she said, "on the river. You said it was the most interesting you'd ever been allowed to be wrong about anything. And then

you stopped. Like you do. Right before you said the rest."

"I remember."

"Say the rest."

And Ben van Kerk — who had crossed an ocean and been believed by the wrong man and lost the easy half of his life and found the hard half worth the keeping; who had learned in a tunnel to stop explaining and on a river to stop measuring and in the dark to stop needing to know the answer before he was allowed to feel the wonder — Ben van Kerk looked at the most important person on the surface of the earth, lit gold by the lights of her own ancient city, and turned his hands over on the cold parapet, and then turned them back, and said nothing for a moment, and did not, for once, reach for a number to fill it.

"The rest," he said, "is I'd like to keep being wrong about you. A long time. If that's — if you'd—"

He stopped. The tips of his ears went red, which he could feel, which was somehow worse. He was forty-four years old and he had thirty million followers and a peer-reviewed paper and a feeler gauge that had silenced a roomful of experts, and he could not finish a sentence.

"*Jirre,*" he muttered, looking at his hands on the parapet. "I'm an engineer, not a—"

Layla kissed him. The warm stubborn thing that had been coming up under everything since the floor of a hijacked taxi, paying itself off at last on a rooftop with the pyramids gone violet in the west and the whole lit city humming below.

When they came apart, breathless, grinning, the two of them — the reluctant competent man and the being of immense importance who had turned out to be, gloriously, magnificently, just a person —

"Took you long enough," said Layla. "I outrank you, you know. Cosmically."

"You're never going to let me forget that."

"Never," she agreed happily, and put her head on his shoulder.

And they stood on the roof of the old city and looked west at the makers' work standing gold and patient against the dark, and somewhere far to the south a man with shifting eyes carried a direction and a depth toward the bottom of the world, and somewhere far below the sea a wonder lay quiet and sounded and kept, owned by no one, heard once, content — and waiting, the way it always waited, for the next person free enough to walk up and feel for the note.

It is still waiting.

Go and stand on the plateau at dawn.

Put your hand on the granite.

Feel for it.

The Real Places in This Book

A note from the author, and an invitation.

Everything in this novel is made up. And almost none of it is.

If you read the first book in this series, you'll recognise that sentence, and you'll know it's the truest thing I can tell you about what you've just read. Ben and Layla are invented. Caspian Roeg, mercifully, is invented — the dive-light raking his face in the cobalt dark of the chamber, the moment the gold went cold under his hand because he'd tried to *take* it instead of *ask* it, the small frightened man behind the showman's panache who could not bear that the wonder was not his: all of that is a story. Hagg Yusuf and Khaled and Dalia and Nadia are invented — though every one of them is a portrait of a *kind* of person who really does keep Egypt: the conservators, the hereditary site-keepers, the fixers, the dive captains, the craftspeople, the ones who do the actual work of guarding the wonders while the world photographs them. The Order is invented. The living key is invented. The chord at the bottom of the sea is invented — that note Layla finally *chose* to sound, the one that answered her because she was free and went silent for the man who tried to own it. Invented, all of it. I wish it weren't.

But the *places* are real — every single one — and you can go and stand in them, and I hope, more than I hope anything else about this

book, that one day you do. Because the deep past belongs to everyone, and the best way to claim a thing is to go and put your hand on it.

Here is what is real, what is genuinely debated, and what I made up. You deserve to know the difference. That honesty is the whole point — and in this book, of all my books, it matters most, because Egypt is the place where the wonder gets *misattributed* and *appropriated* more than anywhere on Earth, and I refuse to add to that. So: the candid version.

Cairo, the Khan el-Khalili, and the Egyptian Museum. All real, all magnificent, all yours to walk through tomorrow. The Khan el-Khalili is a living medieval souk, not a tourist set — the copper-beaters and the lantern-makers and the brass-workers are real trades, practised by real families, some of them for many generations, exactly like Layla's. When I gave her hands that knew worked metal before she ever knew what worked stone could *do*, I was borrowing from real people who really sit in that copper light, hammer in hand, in the same lanes their grandfathers worked. The Egyptian Museum is real (and as I write this, much of its collection is moving to the spectacular new Grand Egyptian Museum out by Giza — go to *both*). *What's invented:* Layla, her family, the specific basalt fragment that answers her on page one, and the answering itself — the note no one else can hear, the warmth in stone that has been cold for five thousand years. *What's real:* the city, the trades, the warmth, the chaos, the light. Go and get lost in the Khan. Drink the tea. Buy a tray from a man who hit it with a hammer until it was beautiful. The money goes to the right place.

Giza — the plateau and the Great Pyramid. Real, world-famous, and somehow still bigger and stranger in person than any photograph or any sentence of mine can prepare you for. *What's genuinely real and genuinely astonishing:* the scale; the precision of the layout; and above all the granite of the King's Chamber and the relieving chambers above it — many tonnes per block, the hardest stone, hauled some 800 km from Aswan, lifted high into the structure, and fitted with a tightness that is, simply, hard to explain and wonderful to stand inside. The lidless granite coffer is real. *What's debated:* how it was all done,

and exactly when the oldest elements date to (Robert Schoch's water-weathering argument for an older Sphinx is real, and really debated, and I've used it only as flavour). *What I invented:* that any of it is a tuned resonant machine, and the layering-as-told by Ben.

And here is the thing I most want to say, the thing this whole book is built around. There is an ugly, persistent idea — you've met it online — that the ancient Egyptians "couldn't have built" their own monuments, and that therefore someone else (a lost race, aliens, anyone-but-them) must have. **I reject that idea completely, and so does this book, on every page.** The ancient Egyptians were among the greatest builders, engineers, artists, and civilisation-makers in the history of our species, and the monuments are *theirs*. When my character Ben argues — in his arrogant, abrasive, certain way — that some of the precision artefacts may have been *inherited*, found and revered and built around by the dynastic Egyptians, that is a *story* I'm telling for the joy of the mystery. And I have him *corrected* in the book itself, in the cool dark of the Serapeum, by an Egyptian elder who has more right to the wonder than Ben will ever have — corrected for the exact reason I'm telling you now: being a magnificent heir is not a lesser thing than being a maker. You belong to a wonder by *carrying* it, not only by having made it. That's not a slogan I bolted on; it's the spine of everything Ben learns and everything Layla finally chooses. Whatever is invented in these pages, this is bedrock: **the genius of ancient Egypt was Egyptian, and the Egypt of today belongs to Egyptians.**

Saqqara and the Serapeum. Real, visitable, and the place that genuinely made me want to write this book. Saqqara is the vast necropolis of the Step Pyramid (the oldest large stone building in the world — built, beyond any doubt, by Egyptians, by the architect Imhotep, and a staggering achievement). The Serapeum is the underground tunnel system nearby, lined with enormous boxes, each cut from a single block of granite or diorite, weighing many tens of tonnes, with separate lids of matching stone. *What is real and genuinely remarkable:* the boxes exist; they are very large, very hard, and very precisely made; and the quality of the interior surfaces and corners is real enough that it has

fascinated engineers and stoneworkers (this is the thread associated in the real world with the precision-granite research of UnchartedX / Ben van Kerkwyk — to whom this book's *Ben van Kerk* is a fond nod, and from whom he is otherwise entirely fictional and entirely his own flawed man). When I had Ben kneel in the torch-light with a feeler gauge and a straightedge and go quiet — when the romp's grin finally faltered into awe because the *number* wouldn't lie — I was dramatising a real fascination, not inventing one. The tolerance is the thing. The tolerance is what stops your breath. *What's debated:* just how precise, by what method, and how old. *What I invented:* the optical-flat-as-tuned-cavity claim, the "we cannot do this" quote as a specific shop document, and — obviously — that the boxes *ring* for anyone. The Apis bull burials are real, and they are the honest, documented use the dynastic Egyptians put the boxes to — the inheritor's reverence, the heir making something sacred of what they found. That part I love most, and that part is history.

The Unfinished Obelisk, Aswan. Real, and you can walk down into the quarry and stand beside it. It is the largest obelisk ever attempted — still lying in the bedrock, never freed, abandoned because the granite cracked. *What's real:* the scale (had it been raised it would have been one of the heaviest single stones humans ever moved); the scoop-shaped trenches; the abandonment-on-a-crack, the work caught mid-act with the makers' hand still visible in it. *What's genuinely debated:* the cutting method — the standard explanation involves pounding with dolerite balls, and there are good experimental archaeologists who have tested it; how completely that accounts for everything in the quarry is exactly the kind of open question I love. *What I invented:* the "tuning-fork blank" idea, the notion that the crack was a component failing rather than a project failing, and the whole conceit that the quarry is a makers' factory floor. The real obelisk needs no help from me to take your breath away. Go at noon, when the granite throws the heat back at you and the ochre light hammers down, and stand in the trench, and look at the size of what someone tried to do.

The Drowned Cities of Abu Qir Bay — Thonis-Heracleion and

Canopus. Real. This is the part readers most assume I made up, and it's the part I made up least. There genuinely are sunken ancient cities in Abu Qir Bay, near Alexandria — Thonis-Heracleion and Canopus — that sank into the sea roughly two thousand years ago when the soft Nile-delta ground liquefied beneath them. They have been surveyed and partly raised over the last few decades by real marine archaeology (the work most associated with Franck Goddio and his teams), and what has come up is breathtaking: colossal statues of gods and pharaohs, temple blocks, steles, gold, a whole drowned sacred landscape lying in the dark under the Mediterranean. A real-life Atlantis that is not a legend and not a hoax — it's *documented,* and increasingly accessible. When I sent Ben and Layla and Roeg down into the cobalt for the climax — dive-lights raking a colossal sunken face, silt blooming gold, the most beautiful thing in the book and the most dangerous thing in the book happening in the same breath — I was setting a made-up chamber inside a real drowned world. *What I invented:* the makers' coupling-chamber beneath the documented ruins; the tuned gold that rings wrong on Ben's instruments; the resonance-as-mechanism; the idea that the submersion was *by design* — water as the medium that couples one end of the instrument to the other across the ocean floor, the far end of the relay that began off the coast of India. The real drowned cities are wonder enough on their own, and they are waiting at the bottom of the bay right now while you read this.

On the bigger ideas, and the gold. This series plays, for the sheer joy of it, with theories from the edges of history — that deep antiquity was more sophisticated than the textbooks allow, that worked gold of strange purity ties distant places together, that the story is older and stranger than we're taught. I love these ideas the way you love a good myth: completely, and with my eyes open. I also want to be honest that mainstream archaeology does not accept most of them, and that "lost advanced civilisation" thinking has, at its worst, an ugly history of stealing credit from the very peoples who built the monuments. This book is written in flat refusal of that ugliness. That is exactly why the wonder of Egypt, in these pages, *answers an ordinary Egyptian woman*

— why the key is a descendant and not a foreign discoverer, why an Egyptian elder and not the famous engineer is the one who names her power, why the man who tries to *own* the chamber is the villain and the thing he covets goes cold and silent in his grasp. The wonder is real. The mystery is real. And both of them belong to the living descendants first, and to all of us second, and to no one who wants to cage them.

Go — and where to spend your money. If this book makes you want to fly to Cairo (it should; that's the whole mission), then go, and when you go, **put your money in Egyptian hands.** Hire Egyptian guides — proper, licensed Egyptologists, of whom there are many superb ones. Buy from the actual craftspeople in the Khan, not the import stalls. Eat where Cairenes eat. Choose Egyptian-run dive operators and tour companies for Alexandria and the bay. The wonders of Egypt have made a great deal of money for a great many people who were not Egyptian, for two hundred years; the least a visitor can do is make sure some of it, this time, goes home. That is not a footnote to the story. That *is* the story — a trust, kept and handed on, not a trophy seized and carried off.

So: go. Stand on the Giza plateau at dawn and watch the limestone go from rose to white to blinding. Climb down into the cool dark of the Serapeum and put your hand inside one of the boxes and feel for yourself how flat the stone is, how sharp the corner where two faces meet, and let it stop your breath the way it stopped Ben's. Walk down into the Aswan quarry at noon and lay your palm on the great cracked fork the makers — or the Egyptians, or somebody, or all of them at once — left behind in the bedrock. And one day, when the diving is easier and the work goes on, go down into the cobalt dark of Abu Qir Bay and meet a drowned god face to face.

You don't need a secret order, or a piece of impossible gold, or a billionaire's submarine.

You just need to go and see. It's free, the best of it — the dawn, the light, the awe — and it's yours, and it has been waiting a very long time.

Feel for the note.

Ma'a salama, and *sawubona*.

— A.J.G.

A Note on Two Small Real Things

The monuments aren't the only things in this book you can go and get for yourself. Two of the smallest objects in it are real, and both belong to Jakobus, and both are exactly what he'd want you to know about them: not magic, just the right thing, found and bought by a man who does his homework.

The cord on his wrist is real, and you can buy it tomorrow. What Jakobus calls "one true thing that looks like nothing" is genuine **military-spec survival paracord** — the real article, sold by the metre, with a **waxed firestarter / tinder strand woven into the core** alongside fishing line and snare wire, so that a thing worn as a plain bracelet is, unbraided, several metres of load-bearing line *and* a fire in your pocket. He doesn't make it; he isn't an artisan with a secret mix (and if the book ever made it sound that way, that's the book showing off, not the man — he'd hate it). He just found the cord that does the most jobs and buys it, the same way he buys his boots and his hat: spend on the few things that are genuinely worth it, and find out which one is right before you spend. People really do list a thousand uses for a length of good paracord, and most of them are true, and the point of carrying it is the point of the whole man — that the most capable thing in the room can look like the least. If you want one, search "mil-spec paracord with firestarter." It costs very little. It is, as he says, not complicated.

And the perfume is real, and it has a name. The scent he wears — the one a single drop of which lives on the cord, the one Layla mistakes for citronella and never quite places, the one that comes off the bracelet at the end and undoes her a little — is a real Egyptian attar you can buy in Cairo: **"46 — Ramsis II," from *Essence of Life — Al Fayed*.** The back-of-the-bazaar shop in the book, the man mixing oils into little bottles and writing the names on by hand, is a portrait of exactly that kind of real Cairo perfumery, where the scent is blended for you and decanted into a small glass vial and named for a pharaoh. I gave it to Jakobus because it is the sort of thing he would do: walk past a hundred shops, find the one that does it properly, choose one and wear it for the rest of his life. If you go to Cairo, find a real attar house, and let someone mix you something, and write the name on by hand. Wear it till people stop being able to place it. That's the whole idea.

Neither of these will start a secret order or open a drowned chamber. They'll just do their quiet, excellent, unglamorous jobs, year on year, and ask nothing, and look like nothing — which is, in this book, the highest praise there is.

— A.J.G.

The Honey Badger

A honey badger, Mellivora capensis, photographed at night.

*The honey badger (*Mellivora capensis*) is the house animal of Arjuna Badger Press. Everything below is true. Most of it sounds made up.*

The honey badger has been listed by *Guinness World Records* as the most fearless animal on Earth. It did not apply for the title and would not have attended the ceremony.

It eats venomous snakes — puff adders, cobras, the lot. If it is bitten badly enough to be knocked out, it has been observed to simply

lie down, sleep off the venom, wake up an hour or two later, and **finish the snake it was already eating.**

Its skin is loose, rubbery, and almost impossible to bite through. A honey badger caught by the scruff can twist around *inside its own skin* and bite whatever is holding it. Bee stings, porcupine quills, leopard teeth — it shrugs off the kind of day that would end most animals.

It raids beehives for honey and grubs and accepts hundreds of stings as a reasonable cost of doing business. This is, in fact, how it got its name.

It will stand its ground against lions, leopards, and hyenas. Not because it expects to win. Because the alternative — *caring* — has never occurred to it.

The most famous of them, **Stoffel**, lived at the Mohololo rehabilitation centre in South Africa and treated every enclosure ever built for him as a personal insult. He stacked rocks to climb the walls. He rolled balls of mud into steps. He used rakes left in the pen as ladders. He learned to unlatch gates. He is, more or less, the patron saint of engineers who refuse to accept that a thing cannot be done.

Honey badger don't care.

Illustrations

A gallery of the real places, peoples, and made wonders behind this book — the wider subject, not only the scenes in the prose. All images are freely licensed (public domain / CC0 / CC BY / CC BY-SA); credits follow.

Places of Awe

The Giza plateau — precision made visceral.

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Khan el-Khalili — copper-light and the call to prayer over haggling.

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Aswan — the granite quarry where the makers' hand is caught mid-cut.

Things of Wonder

The King's Chamber granite — hard stone hauled and set with uncanny fit.

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The Serapeum boxes — single blocks cut to optical-flat tolerances.

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The Unfinished Obelisk — the largest ever attempted, abandoned mid-cut.

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The Sphinx — water-weathering and an older-than-allowed question.

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Philae — a temple the rising water nearly drowned, then lifted and rebuilt stone by stone; the book's water-and-stone motif, real and visitable. (No freely-licensed photograph of the still-submerged Thonis-Heracleion exists; see the credits note.)

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The Peoples

Nubian dress and houses of the Aswan reach.

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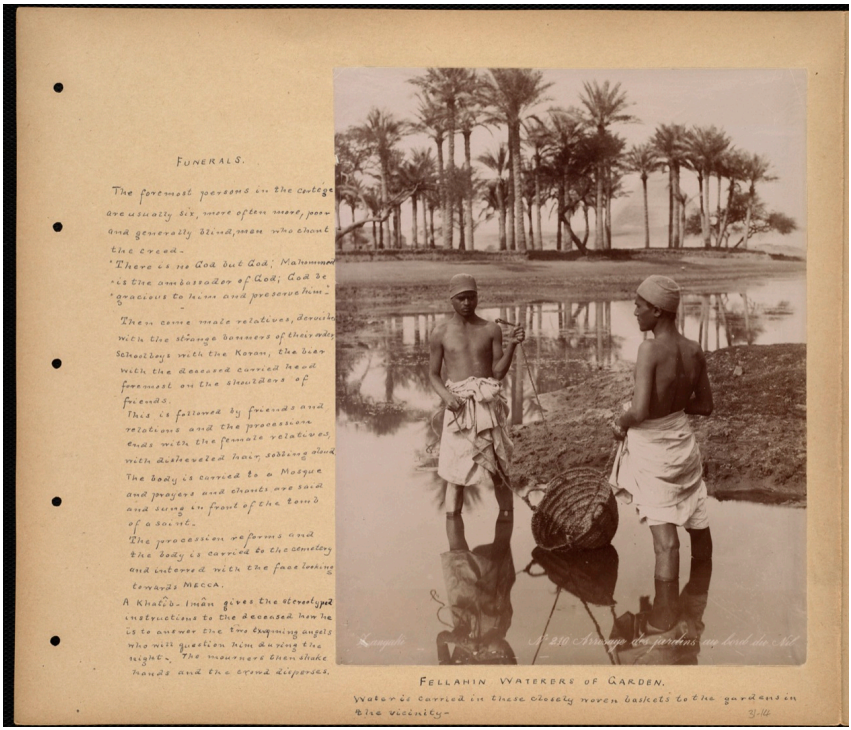

The fellahin — the living Nile.

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Everyday Egyptian dress — the city as opera.

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- *The Serapeum boxes — single blocks cut to optical-flat tolerances.* — Serapeum of Saqqara, Greater Vaults, 1856.png. Auguste Mariette, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
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- *The Sphinx — water-weathering and an older-than-allowed question.* — Great Sphinx □□□) .jpg.(□□□□□ Petar Milošević, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.
- *Philae — a temple the rising water nearly drowned, then lifted and rebuilt stone* — Philae Temple R01.jpg. Marc Ryckaert, CC

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