

HISTORY BEFORE TIME



THE BROKEN CRESCENT

A witness walk, not a conquest.

ANDRIES J. GREYLING

ARJUNA BADGER PRESS

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.

Chapter 1 — Checkpoint

He smelled the border before he saw it — diesel and dust and the particular reek of a place where engines idle for hours because the men ahead are being made to wait. The light was still grey. Somewhere east of him the sun was deciding whether to come up over Iraq, and the trucks stood three hundred deep, nose to tail along the desert road, their drivers asleep against the wheels or squatting on their heels by little blue gas flames, boiling water for the first tea of the day.

Jakobus stood at the edge of the yard and let the wiring tighten in him.

It always did. A lifetime of it and the body never learned different — a fenced approach, a single chute to a gate, men with guns and clipboards standing between you and the other side, the old animal in him going still and watchful, reading exits that did not exist. There was one way through here, and it was forward, past the booths, past the eyes. He had a name for the feeling now that he hadn't had as a younger man. He breathed through it the way he breathed through other things, and looked at the queue, and started counting who got waved on and who got pulled aside.

A bus near the front. Old, swaybacked, full of pilgrims by the look of the bundles roped to its roof. A glance and a hand, and it rolled. A flatbed stacked with rebar got the same. Then a white Land Cruiser, newer than the trucks, tinted — that one got fingers and got stopped, and two soldiers walked round it slow while a third leaned in the driver's window. So. Not random. They were reading the same things he was. New money got looked at. Faith and rebar went through.

He filed it.

“You came early.”

Omar had come up on his blind side, which Jakobus noted and forgave; the man moved well for a man in city shoes. Amman, all of him — the soft leather jacket, the careful hair, the phone in his hand like a small leashed animal. He was not a hard man and did not pretend to be, which was most of why Jakobus had taken him on. The hard ones had something to prove at a gate. Omar just had a cousin in every office between here and Baghdad, and a manner that made tired officials feel briefly important.

“Couldn’t sleep,” Jakobus said.

Omar looked at him a beat too long, the way people did when they wanted to ask about the eyes and didn’t. The shades were on. Wraparounds, scratched, cheap. The sky behind the photochromic lenses was still dark enough that they read as theatre, and he let them.

“Papers.” Omar produced a folder. Letterhead, a stamp, two photographs of Jakobus looking exactly as dull as he wanted to look. “You are with the documentation project. Cultural heritage. Survey of damage for the report. You take photographs of old stones. This is all you do.”

“This is all I do.”

“You believe it when you say it.” Omar handed him a second, smaller permit, creased like it had already lived a hard life, which it had. “Khal-doun arranged this one. He is owed by someone at this post. Use it only if the first does not carry you. Do not show both at once — two papers is a man with something to hide; one paper is a clerk.” He paused. “And, Jakobus. The list.”

“I know about the list.”

“You know about a list. There is a particular list, and at this post a particular man who reads it, and he is bored, which is worse than corrupt.” Omar’s eyes went to the booth and came back. “If you are on a list, it is not for stones. They will not tell you why. They will only become very polite. If they become very polite, you let me talk, and you make yourself the most boring man in Jordan.”

“I’m good at that.”

“You think you are.” But Omar almost smiled. “Drink the tea if it comes. Refusing tea here is louder than a gun.”

Jakobus said nothing to that. Omar didn’t know how right he was, and there was no reason to teach him.

The queue ate the morning the way queues do. By the time they reached the first booth the sun was up and flat and already beginning to mean it, and Jakobus had drunk in the whole rhythm of the place — the way a sergeant down the line never looked at papers, only at hands; the way the youngest soldiers swaggered and the oldest didn’t bother; the way a fat man in a customs uniform sat in his chair the way a chief sits, knowing the chair was the power and his body merely occupied it. That one. That was the man Omar meant.

But the first booth was a boy.

Nineteen, maybe. A rifle slung wrong, muzzle drifting where a tired man’s muzzle drifts, and a face still soft at the edges under a cap a size too big. He put his hand out for the papers, and Jakobus, before the hand was even level, took the shades off.

He did it without ceremony. Folded one arm, hooked them into the breast of the open field shirt, and met the boy’s eyes with his own bare ones — grey this morning, grey as the dawn had been, cool and uncovered and saying the one thing the gesture always said: *here are my eyes, there is nothing behind them, look as long as you like*. The boy’s gaze caught on the colour of them for half a second the way people’s did, then slid down to the folder, reassured by something he could not have named.

That was the whole trick. There was no other.

“*Sabah al-kheir*,” Jakobus said. Morning of goodness. And then, because the boy had a Bedouin set to his jaw and the road behind them ran out toward the badia, he let the consonants go soft and country, the way the people out there let them go — not the clean radio Arabic of a man who learned from a screen, but the swallowed, kitchen-table Arabic of a man who had sat in too many tents drinking too many glasses of tea while old men decided whether he was worth talking to. “*Allah ysabbhak bilkheir. Ya’tik el-’afyeh*.”

The boy's face moved.

It was small. A loosening around the eyes, the faint surprise of a man hearing his grandmother's mouth come out of a foreigner's beard. He had been ready, in whatever script the morning had given him, to deal with one more European who wanted his stones and his border and would speak at him in English and through a fixer. And here was the European, sounding like home.

"*Wa fik*," the boy said, and it came out warmer than the uniform wanted it to.

Behind him the fat man in the chair watched without moving.

A glass of tea appeared. It was the boy who got it — sent a younger soldier scuttling, or perhaps the tea simply existed here the way water existed, a permanent fact of the post — and it was put into Jakobus's hands, scalding, in a little waisted glass with two fingers of sugar gone to syrup at the bottom. Omar's eyes flicked to him: *drink it*.

He drank it. He did not blow on it or wince or set it down to cool, because a man who treated the tea like a hazard treated the people like hazards, and he had learned that a long way south of here, around fires whose smoke he could still call up behind his eyes. He drank it the way the boy drank his, in two long pulls, and made a small sound of approval that was not performed, because it was good tea, and said so. "*Shukran. Hatha shay zein.*"

The boy ducked his head, pleased, and bent to the papers.

This was the part Jakobus did not get to do.

He had spent his life being the one who fixed things, who stood between, who read the room and walked everyone out the safe door. And the discipline of this work — Omar's work, the fixer's chain, the whole grammar of getting a foreigner over a line — was that the line was not his to walk. It was Omar's. So when the fat man levered himself up out of his chair and came over, slow, and took the heritage permit between two fingers and looked at it the way a man looks at a thing he has already decided is wrong, Jakobus did the hardest thing in his repertoire.

Nothing.

“This stamp,” the fat man said, in English, to make sure Jakobus understood he was being addressed and could be afraid. “This is the wrong office.”

It was not the wrong office. Omar had told him it was the right office. But the man held the power the way the chair held it, by occupation, and the wrongness of the stamp was a door he was opening so that Jakobus would understand there was a fee to walk through it.

Jakobus let his face stay exactly as boring as the photograph. He looked, in that moment, like a man who took pictures of old stones for a report nobody would read — soft in the belly, greying, a little baffled, the kind of harmless that does not even register as a category of person. He let the fat man have all of it.

Omar stepped in smooth as oil.

What passed between them then was a thing Jakobus could follow but had no business touching — fast, low, courteous to the point of insult, a dance of *of course, you are absolutely right, my brother, what an oversight, surely there is a way, you are a reasonable man*. Omar’s hand moved once, briefly, and the briefness was the courtesy: nothing held up, nothing counted, the gesture small enough that no one watching could be sure money had moved at all, which was the entire point and the only way it could be done with everyone’s honour intact. The fat man’s face went, by degrees, from offence to magnanimity, as if he were doing them a kindness, which in the local accounting he was.

Jakobus watched a beetle work across the dust of the yard and did not exist.

It would have been easy to do it himself. That was the thing nobody understood about the no-gun rule, about all of it — the hardness wasn’t in the doing, it was in the *not*. A pistol made you feel like the most powerful man in the room and turned you into the most searched one. Doing it yourself made you feel competent and made Omar a passenger, and a passenger could not save you on the road in three days when his cousin’s name was the only thing standing between you and a hole. You let the man whose ground it was hold the rope. You made yourself cargo. It cost something, every time, to be cargo.

"Khalas," the fat man said at last, magnanimous, and dropped the permit back into Jakobus's hands as if returning a borrowed thing, and went back to his chair to be the chair.

He thought he was through.

He had the folder and the second, unused permit warm against his ribs, and the boy soldier had already lifted the boom by hand, leaning his whole soft weight into the counterbalance — and then the boy paused, the bar half up, looking not at Jakobus's face now but at his arm.

The field shirt hung open, the way it always did, the sleeves shoved back, and on the bare forearm where the morning light caught it was the small dark shape of a continent. Africa, inked rough and plain, the kind of thing a man gets young and keeps because removing it would be admitting something.

"You are from there?" the boy said. He had switched to English, shy of it, proud to try. His finger didn't point; his chin lifted toward the tattoo. "Africa."

"South," Jakobus said. "The bottom of it."

"It is far."

"It's far."

The boy looked at the shape a moment longer, and Jakobus understood the look, because it was not suspicion now, it was the other thing — the thing that lived in a kid stuck on a border in a country the brochures didn't sell, who would never in his life see the bottom of Africa or the top of anywhere, who was nineteen with a rifle slung wrong and a list to read and a fat man behind him owning the chair. It was a kid wondering, for one unguarded second, what it was to be a man who could put a place on his arm because he had simply *gone* there.

Jakobus did not look away and did not fill it with anything. He let the boy have the look the way he'd let him have the eyes.

"It is beautiful?" the boy asked. "There?"

And there it was — the only honest dishonesty in the whole exchange, because Jakobus could not name the one place he meant, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, the door that would never open for him again. So he gave the boy the true thing without the cost on it.

“The most beautiful place I ever saw is in Africa,” he said. “I can’t go back to it.” He shrugged, and it was almost a smile. “So I look at other places now.”

The boy nodded slowly, as if that made a sad kind of sense to a boy on a border, which it did, and he leaned the rest of his weight into the boom, and the bar went up, and the road on the far side ran out flat and pale into Iraq.

Jakobus put the shades back on — the light was coming now, hard and white off the dust, and the lenses had begun to darken of their own accord, doing the medical work they’d been doing badly for years. He nodded to the boy. “*Allah ma’ak.*” God with you.

“*Ma’a salama,*” the boy said. Go in peace.

He walked back to where Omar waited by the car, and behind him the queue closed over the gap he’d left, three hundred trucks deep, none of them his concern. The wiring in him had not let go. It would not let go for days, he knew, not properly, because there was no border in this whole crescent he could read all the way down, and the thing he had come to do had no gate at the end of it and no prize — only stones still standing, and the people still standing over them, who would tell him what the stones meant because it was not his to say.

“Well?” Omar said, opening the door, his city shoes already grey to the laces.

“They waved me through.” Jakobus looked east, into the white. “But they saw me first.”

Omar didn’t understand it, and didn’t need to. He got in. The engine turned over. And they drove on into the country no one was supposed to want to see, the boy at the boom already shrinking in the mirror, lifting his hand once before he went back to reading the trucks for the man in the chair.

Chapter 2 — The Road South

The driver's name was Faisal, and he drove the way men drive who have decided the road is no longer in the business of killing them — fast, both windows down, one wrist hooked over the wheel, the other arm out in the air like he was testing the wind for rain. Maybe sixty. He had a face that had been left out in the weather and not minded it.

Omar had handed Jakobus over at a junction north of Nasiriyah with the brisk relief of a man returning borrowed property, and gone back toward Amman in a different car. *Faisal will take you down. He's family to Khaldoun in the way that matters.* Which meant nothing on paper and everything on the road.

South of the junction the land did the thing Jakobus had been waiting for it to do.

It went flat. Not the flat of the Free State, which was high and clean and let you see weather coming an hour off — this was a low, used flat, the flat of a place worked so long it had forgotten what it looked like before. Date palms in ragged files, leaning. Dust the colour of weak tea over everything. And then, off to the left where the highway ran a kilometre clear of it, a long straight scar in the earth, banked on both sides, dead now and full of windblown sand. A canal. Old. Older than old. Running arrow-true toward something the eye couldn't find.

Jakobus watched it slide past and said nothing, because there was nothing to say that wouldn't be smaller than the thing itself. Somebody had cut that. By hand, by reed-basket, by the labour of a city, four or five thousand years ago, and the water had gone down it to

make the desert grow grain, and the grain had made the city, and the city had made writing so a man could count the grain. He had read about it on a screen. The screen had not prepared him for the way the line just *kept going*.

"They are everywhere," Faisal said, not looking, having clocked exactly where Jakobus's eyes had gone. "These canals. Some, my grandfather's grandfather still used. Some, no one alive remembers using." He took a hand off the wheel to gesture at the whole baked flatness, generous, like a man showing you his yard. "All of this is made. You think it is desert. It is a field that died."

A field that died. Jakobus turned that over and put it in his pocket with the stones.

The heat came up through the floor of the car and through the seat and sat on him.

He'd made his peace with cold a long time ago — cold he could meet, bare-armed, banked from the inside; cold was a thing you out-waited. This was the other one, the one he had no trick for. By mid-morning the air through the windows had stopped being wind and started being a hairdryer aimed at the face. The light came off the road in a wet shimmer that wasn't water. He drank from the bottle Faisal had wedged between them, warm now, and felt his concentration thin at the edges the way it always did when the sun got its full weight on him.

So he did the only honest thing, which was less. He went quiet. He let his hand find the seat where the bass would have been, in the Beast, ten thousand kilometres away on another continent, and set his breathing to a beat that wasn't playing, and sweated, and watched the dead fields run by, and kept his face out of the worst of the glare under the shades, and waited for the day to be over the way you wait out anything you can't fight.

Faisal talked. He didn't need answers; he needed an ear, and Jakobus had one, and giving it was the cheapest courtesy there was. The talk was good. The price of diesel. A son in Basra. The road two years ago versus the road now. A cousin who'd married badly. Jakobus listened the way he listened to everyone — the listening of a man who'd be asked, later, what the weather of this person was, and meant to get it right.

The checkpoint came at the edge of a town that was mostly low concrete and corrugated sheet and a mosque whose new tilework was the only thing in fifty kilometres that wasn't the colour of dust.

Faisal slowed without being told and put both hands on the wheel and stopped talking, and that was the first real lesson of the road, right there: the change in the old man. Easy a second ago, now folded inward, smaller, harmless, eyes down. Jakobus had been doing that trick for forty years, and it was a quiet pleasure to watch a man do it well who'd never been taught it as a *trick* — to him it was just survival, the body of a country that had learned what soldiers were for.

The shades came off. He folded them and held them loose in his lap where a hand could see they held nothing.

Four soldiers, and they did not match. One in proper army digital, sand-pattern, boots squared away. Two in a green that belonged to some other year and some other authority, mismatched even with each other. One in a tracksuit top over military trousers with a rifle older than he was. Mixed uniforms meant mixed allegiance meant a place fought over by more than one idea of who was in charge, and the only doctrine that worked at a boom like this was the same everywhere: make four men feel, separately, that you are not their problem.

The one in proper kit came to the window. Young. Tired in the eyes the way the boy at the last post had been tired, but harder-used. He looked at Faisal, looked past him at the soft middle-aged foreigner in the passenger seat with the open shirt and the loaded vest and the eyes out plain in the light, and asked Faisal something flat.

Faisal answered. Heritage survey. Papers. The word for *foreigner*.

The soldier leaned to the window, and Jakobus gave him the eyes and the small useless nod of a man who knows he's the cargo and is fine about it, and said his greeting — the long courteous one, the full back-and-forth, in the Arabic that wasn't the Arabic of a course. He'd learned this dialect's grandfather a long way west of here, around different fires, and it came out swallowed and idiomatic and a little wrong for any textbook, and the boy's head tilted half a degree the way a head does when a sound arrives that the brain wasn't braced for.

"You speak like —" the soldier started, in English now, then stopped, hunting it.

"Badly," Jakobus offered.

"No. Like —" He gave up on the word and grinned, briefly, a kid's grin under the hard face. "Where?"

"South. Far south. Africa." He let the accent sit on it, the Afrikaans gravel under the English, made no effort to plane it flat. *Africa* was a good word; it cost nothing and bought a moment of a man's curiosity, and a curious man is not, in that minute, a suspicious one.

"Ah." The boy straightened, satisfied with something, and that was that — he'd placed the strange sound in a box marked *far away and not my problem*, and a sound in a box does not get a car searched. He waved a hand at Faisal: go. Then, to Jakobus, in careful schoolroom English, with great seriousness: "Welcome to Iraq."

"*Shukran*," Jakobus said. "It's a beautiful country." And meant it, the way he meant it at every boom — not flattery, just the truth said out loud to a man who didn't get to hear it often about the place that was eating his twenties.

The boy looked, for a second, like he might say something back. Then a truck came up behind them and the moment closed and they were through, the boom swinging up, Faisal's hands loosening on the wheel and the old man unfolding back into himself by degrees as the town fell behind.

"You did that well," Faisal said, after a while, which from Faisal was a great deal.

Jakobus put the shades back on against the white road and said nothing, because the thing you do well is not improved by agreeing that you did it.

They stopped for tea where the highway widened for no reason and a man had built a stall out of a shipping pallet and a tarpaulin and the will of God. A brazier. A kettle black as a crow. A row of small glasses standing upside down on a cloth. The tea man was younger than his stall suggested and had the wide quick face of someone who'd decided, against the evidence, to find the whole business of being alive amusing.

He poured. The tea came out the colour of garnet, scalding, three sugars whether you wanted them or not. Jakobus took the glass by its rim with two fingers, the way you do when the glass is too hot to hold any other way and the holding-anyway is itself the manners.

There was a plate. Bread, dates, something fried that he couldn't name and didn't ask about. He ate it. All of it. The careful traveller's instinct — *where has this been, whose hands, what water* — he'd cured himself of decades ago, the way you cure a horse of shying, by exposure and by refusing to give the fear the dignity of a vote. To eat what a man offers in his own place, by his own hand, is to say *I trust you and I'm not above your table*, and there was no sentence in any of his languages that did the work that one mouthful did.

The tea man said something to Faisal and laughed, and Faisal translated, grinning: "He says the African eats like a man who has been hungry."

"Tell him," Jakobus said, around the bread, "I've been hungry."

That got a real laugh out of the tea man when it came back to him, and a second glass, unasked — and the second glass is the whole game. The second glass means *stay*, means *you are not just a car that stopped*, and Jakobus drank it slow to honour it though it scalded the same as the first.

His hand, while they talked over him, found the flat cool weight of the onyx in the vest pocket, the one that ate the light, and turned it once between thumb and finger the way another man would touch wood. A woman in a market in another country, another life, had pressed it on him for the evil eye, and he did not believe in the evil eye, and he'd told her so, and he carried it anyway. He covered all bases. It was a joke he made to himself now, mostly, here where the bases a man had to cover were not the kind a stone could help with. But the weight of it was good in the fingers. The habit was good. You kept the small true things and you didn't ask them to be more than they were.

Back on the road the sun finally began to lose its top, and the heat came off his shoulders one degree at a time, and he felt himself come back into the day the way you come up out of deep water.

Faisal had gone quiet, watching the verge. After a while he tapped

the wheel.

“You see the road,” he said. “The black. The asphalt.” Jakobus looked. The strip of it ran ahead, patched and rutted but plain. “You stay on it. Or the track the cars have made beside it, where you can see they have driven — many tyres, you understand, many days.” He took one hand off the wheel and laid it flat in the air, drawing the edge. “Not there.” He pointed his chin at the open flat past the verge, the dead fields, the dust, the leaning palms. “There it is clean. It looks like nothing. A man could walk it.” He shook his head, slow, the way you shake your head at a thing that has already happened to someone. “Forty years of war put metal in this ground. Some of it the Iranians. Some of it Saddam. Some of it the Americans. Some of it the others, after.” He shrugged, and the shrug held a great many funerals in it, lightly. “The land remembers all of them. You walk where the tyres have been. The tyres know.”

Jakobus heard it the way he heard a man tell him where the snakes lay on his own farm — not as colour, not as drama, but as the plain operating knowledge of a person who had buried people for the lack of it. *The tyres know.* He filed it the way he’d filed the canal and the dead fields. This was the real currency of the road, worth more than any of the three weapons he carried and all the cord on his wrist: a local man saying, flat, *here is the line between alive and not, and it is invisible, and I will show it to you.*

“Thank you,” he said. And then, because the old man had given him something real and you answer real with real: “I’ll stay on the black.”

Faisal nodded, pleased, the lesson received and so worth the giving.

The light went long and gold and the dust in the air turned it to something you could almost stand in. And out ahead, where the flat ran to its end and the haze pulled back off the far ground for the last hour of the day — a shape.

Not a hill. The land here didn’t make hills. A made shape, stepped, square-shouldered, sitting up out of the dead fields with the particular wrongness of a thing built by hands in a place that built nothing for itself anymore. The low sun caught one face of it and threw the other into blue shadow, and the stepped edges stood up clean and certain against a sky going the colour of the inside of a fig.

Jakobus took the shades off — there was no uniform to disarm, only the thing itself — and looked at it bare-eyed across the kilometres of broken field and old water and buried metal, and felt the wiring in him that had been tight since the border do something it had not done in a long time, which was ease, one notch, the way it eased only ever for the very oldest things.

“Ur,” Faisal said, quietly, and slowed the car without being asked, and let the foreigner look.

Chapter 3 — The Ziggurat

The gate was a length of pipe across two oil drums, and a man in a chair who did not get up when the truck stopped. Behind him the ground rose — not a hill, Jakobus saw, nothing the earth had made on its own, but a thing with corners, terraced and deliberate, the last of the sun catching its western face and turning the brick the colour of a banked fire. Faisal cut the engine. The desert quiet came in through the open windows, and Jakobus sat a second longer than he needed to, looking at it.

He took the shades off and folded them into the chest pocket of the open shirt.

The man in the chair was a soldier — half a uniform, the trousers regulation and the shirt somebody's brother's, a rifle leaning against the drum the way a broom leans in a kitchen. There was a younger one behind him, standing, who did get up, and who had the look Jakobus knew from a hundred borders: a boy told to be careful and not yet told what about.

He let the boy come to the window. He kept his hands loose on his knees where they could be seen, and gave the greeting the way the road had taught it to him — swallowed and quick and a little wrong for a textbook, *salaam* and the rest of it, the small wrong turns that said *I did not learn you from a book*. The boy's face did the thing. A fraction. The shoulders coming down a finger's width.

Then the older one wanted paper.

Jakobus had paper. The survey permit Omar had carried him in on; the second one folded under it that nobody had needed yet; a letter on a ministry letterhead that was real the way most things in this

country were real, which was to say it had been real once and was now mostly a story everyone agreed to tell. He laid them on the sill. The soldier read them the way a man reads a language he can manage but does not love, lips moving, thumb going down the lines, and at the bottom he found the place where the story stopped agreeing with itself and looked up.

"This is old," he said. "We need newer. From Nasiriyah. The office."

Faisal began to talk and the soldier did not look at him, which told Jakobus more than the words did — that this was not about the paper, or not only; that the paper was the thing a tired man reached for when he wanted the afternoon to be somebody else's problem. Jakobus did not argue. Arguing handed the man the fight he was half-hoping for. He kept his eyes on the soldier's eyes and his face open and empty, and waited, and the waiting was the work, the same as it had always been — let the room fill up with the silence and see what falls out of it.

What fell out was a woman, coming down the slope of the reconstructed stair with a clipboard against her hip and a scarf gone loose at the back of her head, walking the way people walk on ground they own. Perhaps forty, dust to the knees, a pen behind one ear and another in her fist. She came up to the drum and said something to the soldier that Jakobus caught half of — a name, a department, the word for *guest* — and the soldier's hand, which had been holding the permit out over the sill like a thing he was about to keep, drew back and gave it to her instead.

She glanced at it. She glanced at Jakobus. Her eyes were quick and unimpressed and not unkind.

"You are the heritage survey," she said, in English, dry as the field.

"I'm the one they sent."

"Mm." She handed the permit back to Faisal, not to him, which he noted and did not mind. To the soldier she said three more sentences, and whatever was in them the man waved a hand the way you wave off a fly, and the boy lifted the pipe off the drums and stood holding it, and that was the gate.

"Nadia," she said, when the truck was through and parked and he stood in the long shadow of the thing. She did not offer the hand.

She offered the place, with a small tilt of the clipboard. "You will want to climb it before the light goes. Everyone does. Come."

He had read the briefing. He knew, the way you know a thing on paper, that the façade was a reconstruction — the lower terrace and the great triple stair rebuilt in the 1960s, new brick laid up the broken slope so a visitor could climb where four thousand years had worn the original down to its core. He had filed it under the thing he filed most reconstructions under, which was *they tidied the corpse for the photograph*. He had not said it aloud. He had thought it, the way the tourist thinks it, and he had been wrong, and Nadia took the wrongness out of him without raising her voice, the way you'd take a splinter from a child's foot.

"You are thinking it is fake," she said. A step ahead of him on the stair, not looking back. "The new brick. The clean part."

He said nothing, which was an answer.

"It is new." She stopped on the second terrace and put her hand flat against the wall beside her, and he saw then that the wall changed under her palm — the brick she touched machine-square and pale, a course below it running darker, older, the edges gone soft as soap, and a place where the two met and you could lay your thumb on the line between the century and the millennium. "This part, they made it so the old part would not fall down. You understand? Without the new, the wind takes the old. It is not a lie they built. It is a —" she searched, found it "— a splint. You do not say the splint is fake because it is not the bone."

"No," he said. "You don't."

"This is real," she said, and patted the dark course, the old one, "and this —" she touched the pale brick above it "— is what we could save. Both true." She looked at him then, over her shoulder, the quick unimpressed eyes finding his bare ones and reading whatever was in them. "People want one or the other. The whole thing perfect, or the whole thing a fraud. The world is not so tidy. Come. The top."

He came. He was breathing harder than he wanted to be — the heat still in the brick and rising off it into his face, his body a day's worth of cargo, a thing in his chest reminding him he was not thirty. But

near the top he stopped minding, because his hand had found the wall the way hers had, and the wall told him things.

He ran his palm along a course of the old brick. It was warm — not the warmth of his own hands but a different warmth, borrowed and given back, the heat the day had poured into it now leaning out against his skin the way a stone leans heat at you after the sun is gone. The bricks were not the size of any brick he had laid. Longer, flatter, and between them, in the joints, bitumen gone black and brittle and shining where it had cracked — and pressed into the bitumen, where two bricks met, the print of a thumb. Somebody's thumb. A man who had stood here with the day's heat in *his* face and the wet brick in his hands, and pushed it home and gone on to the next, ten thousand of them, a hundred thousand, the courses climbing, and his thumb in the tar of one of them where it stayed.

Jakobus put his own thumb beside it. He did not press. He just laid it there, in the warm, beside the old mark, and for a moment something in him that had been arguing all day — about the cargo, the gate, the man in the chair, the field that died and the tyres that knew — sat down and was quiet.

He did not say any of it. He took his hand off the wall.

"You felt that," Nadia said. Not a question.

"Ja."

"Everyone feels it and then they want to tell me what it means." Her arms folded, looking out, not at him. "The Americans, after, they made a base here. You know? Right here. They put their tents at the foot of it. Some came up like you, put the hand on the brick, and then they had to make it about themselves. About God, or about — *imagine*, they say, *imagine if these people could see us now*." Her mouth did something that was not quite a smile. "I tell them: these people could count the stars and run a river uphill into a city of two hundred thousand and write down a number you could not write down. They are not imagining us. We are imagining them."

He said, "What do you say to that. When they say it."

"I say nothing. I let them be small in their own way." She glanced at him. "You did not say it."

“No.”

“Good.”

The light went the way it goes there — not slow, a switch thrown somewhere west, the brick draining from fire to ash in the space of a few minutes, the cold coming up off the ground the instant the sun let go of it. Down at the base, in the angle where the stair met the terrace and the structure threw its body between them and the last wind, a man Nadia called by name had a small fire of charcoal going in a tin and a pot on it, and they sat on a folded tarpaulin in the dark of the ziggurat’s shadow while she poured tea into glasses the size of a thumb.

He took his in the right hand and held it and did not drink, and she watched him not drink it, and something moved behind her eyes that he recognised and did not name. He waited until she lifted hers. Then he drank. It was black and far too sweet and scalding and exactly right, and he held the empty glass loose for the second pouring the way Faisal’s tea vendor had taught his hands two hundred kilometres north, and when it came he drank that too.

She told him about 2003. Not as a speech — in pieces, the way you tell a thing you have told before and are tired of and cannot stop telling. The ziggurat itself had stood; it was too big and too poor in plunder, a mountain of brick with nothing inside but more brick. It was the museum stores and the dig houses and the sites with their backs turned that the trucks came to in the dark — the cylinder seals you could close your hand around, carved with whole worlds; the tablets; the small clay things that fit a pocket and were each one of them a sentence out of the only mouths that ever spoke that tongue. Gone in a week. Some of it came back, later, in boxes, from customs sheds in cities with cold weather. Most did not.

She pointed, in the dark, at things he could not see and she did not need to. There, the trench somebody had opened with a backhoe looking for gold, and found brick, and left a wound the rain widened every winter. There, a wall they had braced last year with rebar and cement because there had been no money for anything truer. There, where a shell had taken the corner off a guardhouse from the time before the time before, and they had left it, because you cannot mend

everything and some scars are also the record.

“We do not save it,” she said. “You understand. This is the thing. We cannot save it. The river is gone, the salt is in the ground, the wind does what it does, the war does what it does, the men with trucks do what they do. We slow it. We write down what is here while it is here. We put the splint on the bone.” She turned the empty glass in her fingers. “And when someone comes who can carry the seeing of it to people who will never stand here — that is the work also. That is the most of the work, some years.”

He thought about saying something then. He had a thing half-formed — about the canals he had passed coming in, about a people who had made water climb, about how the dead field outside the gate had been the richest ground in the world once and what that did to a man to look at. It was a good thing and it was true and it would have been his, and he closed his mouth on it and let it go down with the tea.

The third glass came. He took it.

“You listen,” Nadia said, “more than the others.” She said it the way you’d note the weather, neither praise nor suspicion, just a fact set on the table between them. “Why.”

He turned the small hot glass in his clean fingers. Somewhere down the slope Faisal said something to the fire-tender and they both laughed, low, and out past the gate a dog started up and another answered it, and over all of it the dark mass of the thing stood between them and the wind, four thousand years of it, warm still on the side where his hand had been.

“Because it isn’t mine to say,” he said.

She looked at him a moment in the firelight. Then she poured herself the last of the pot and drank it, and got to her feet with the stiffness of someone who had been on her knees in dirt all day, and said the night was coming hard and the road back to Nasiriyah was not one to be on after dark — the soldiers got nervous, and the ground past the asphalt was a thing he should already have been told about.

“I have,” he said. “The tyres know.”

“Good,” she said. “Then you have learned one true thing today.” She

paused at the edge of the firelight, the clipboard back against her hip, the place hers in the dark the same as it had been hers in the light. "Tomorrow Babylon. They have rebuilt a gate there too. You will want to tell me it is fake." A beat, dry as the field. "Try not to."

He did not put the shades back on. There was nothing to read in the dark but the fire, and the fire could see him fine.

Chapter 4 — Night at Ur

Faisal did not leave after all. Somewhere in the tea, the question of driving back to Nasiriyah in the dark had answered itself, and the men who kept the site told him plainly that a man drove that road at night the way a man swam past the breakers — not unless something was already chasing him. So the truck stayed nosed in against the low mudbrick of the dig house, and the fire the workers built was a small one, scrap timber and a broken pallet, set in the lee of a spoil heap where the wind off the river couldn't reach it.

The ziggurat stood over all of it. The moon was a day or two off full, and it came up fat and yellow behind the great stair, and for a while the brick took the light and held it the way the hessian bag on the Beast held cold — gave nothing back, just kept it. Jakobus sat where he was put, on an upturned crate at the fire, and watched the thing not be in a hurry. It had been there five thousand years. It was not going to perform for him.

There were six of them, plus Nadia, plus Faisal off to one side rolling a cigarette he did not smoke so much as keep company with. The food came around the way food comes around at a working fire — without ceremony and without anyone's permission: a blackened pot of rice gone slightly to the bottom, a stew the colour of the spoil heaps with goat in it somewhere, flat bread torn and passed, a bowl of something pickled and fierce that the youngest worker pushed at him with a face already laughing.

"He will not eat it," the boy said in Arabic, to the others, not to him. "Look. The hand is already slowing."

Jakobus took a piece of bread, folded a good measure of the fierce pickled thing into it, and ate it. Turnip, he thought, and a great deal

of garlic, and a vinegar that had opinions. He chewed. He swallowed. He took a second.

The fire went quiet the way a fire goes quiet when the joke has turned the wrong way round.

“He eats us from us,” said the oldest of them, a man called Saad with a face like the brick — and there was the soft easing in the words that Jakobus had been listening for since the boom gate, the sound of a room deciding he was not, after all, going to be work. He had done nothing to earn it but eat. That was usually how it went.

“I’ll eat anything you put down,” he said, in the Arabic he had — the wrong-for-a-textbook Arabic, the swallowed ends of words, the dialect stitched up out of every desert he’d been put down in. He saw Nadia hear it. Saw the small recalibration cross her face and go. “There are two things in this world that have beaten me. Only two.”

“Pork,” said the boy, certain.

“No.” He had decided, long ago, to tell this story straight, because the grace of it was that it was true. “A tea. Far north and east of here, off the top of the world, where the herders make it with butter and salt. They warm it, and the butter goes off on the back of the tongue, and your whole body is screaming for something sweet, and you are pouring salt into it. I drank one cup. The man who gave it to me was very kind. I gave him back a face I am not proud of.”

Saad laughed, a real one. “And the second?”

“A fish.” Jakobus tore more bread. “Up in the cold, where they bury it to make it strong. By the time it is ready, it walks into the room before the bowl does. Ammonia. Time. The people there eat it and live to ninety. I tried it twice.” He held up two fingers. “My body refused me both times. Not the fish’s fault. Mine.”

“You blame yourself for a fish,” Nadia said, dry, and the workers found that the funniest thing said all night — that a man would lose to a fish and take the loss as his own.

“It’s mine to carry,” Jakobus said. “The fish was only being a fish.”

That was the right thing to have lost to, here. He had learned it across a hundred fires and it never once failed: a man who eats everything and tells you, deadpan, the two small things that put him on the floor

is a man you can take into the dark with you. The strength was never the trick. The being beaten — and owning it — was the trick.

The talk widened the way it does. Saad had a daughter at the university in Nasiriyah, studying to be the thing he'd spent his life being without the word for it — a conservator, she called herself; he said the word in English with great care, the way you carry a full cup. The boy, whose name was Hussein, had nobody at the university and wanted them to know he didn't need it; he had the site in his hands already, the lower courses memorised brick by brick, where the 2003 men had dug and where they'd missed. A third man said nothing the whole night and then said, once, that his brother had gone north in the bad years and not come back, and the fire let that sit and did not pick it up, and after a while the talk went on around it the way the road went on around the field that died.

"They will tell you we are sad people," Nadia said to him, low, while the others argued some point of football that needed no translation. "We are not sad people. We are people with a great deal behind us, which is different. The sad ones leave."

"You stayed."

"My grandmother dug here with the British in 'thirty-something. My mother did not get to dig anywhere; there were other things in those years." She turned a stick in the coals. "I get to dig. My niece will get to dig, if there is anything left to put a trowel into. So." She lifted one shoulder. "Not sad. Stubborn. You know the word."

"I know the word." He thought of a small fierce animal that walked toward the teeth long past sense, and did not say it.

It was Hussein who reached over with the bread-hand and the boy's directness and took hold of Jakobus's bare forearm, turning it to the firelight. "What is this?"

"That one's home." The Africa one, the old one, the outline of the continent worn soft at the edges with twenty years of sun. He let the boy look. "The shape of where I'm from. You can keep a thing on your skin so you don't have to keep explaining it."

"And these?" Hussein's thumb moved up the inner forearm, where the firelight caught the flowing script, and the boy's lips moved before he'd decided to read, the way Arabic pulls the eye of anyone raised

to it. He got two words in and stopped, frowning, because the words were familiar and the order was not from any book he knew.

“That one’s mine,” Jakobus said, and took the arm back, easy, no weather in it, folding it across his knee so the script went to the dark. “A thing I read once. It stuck.”

Hussein wanted more. Saad said something to him in the low register fathers use, and the boy let it go, and Jakobus was grateful to the old man and did not show it. There was a clef low on the other arm Hussein hadn’t found, and Jakobus did not help him find it.

Then the lights came across the spoil heaps, two of them, jolting, and an engine that wasn’t Faisal’s, and the fire went still in a different way.

A patrol. The same makeshift authority as the boom gate, an hour stale and looking for something to do with the dark. Two of them down off the back of the technical, the older one hanging by the bonnet, the younger one walking in with his rifle slung wrong and his torch up.

Jakobus took the shades off.

He hadn’t been wearing them — it was night, they were pushed up into his hair where they’d sat since the climb — but he reached up and lifted them off the crown of his head and folded them and set them on his knee, in the light, where the torch would find his eyes before it found anything else. Bare eyes. Nothing behind the glass to wonder about. The oldest reflex he had, and the cheapest, and it had walked him through more gates than everything else in the vest put together.

He did not stand. He did not speak. He let the torch come over his face and find a tired pale stranger sitting at a working fire with bread in his hand, and he let it find Nadia rising, unhurried, brushing the dust off, becoming — the way she’d become at the gate — the only authority in the firelight that anyone present actually answered to.

She spoke. He let her. Permits, the survey, the foreign guest, the State Board, a name dropped that made the older soldier by the bonnet straighten a fraction. The younger one’s torch came back to Jakobus twice and twice found a man who met it plainly and said nothing, and there is no charge a young soldier can build against a quiet man with empty hands and his eyes given freely to the light.

Faisal stayed exactly where he was and kept his cigarette and was furniture.

It took six minutes. Nadia did not raise her voice and did not lower it, and the thing that ended it was not anything she said but the moment the patrol understood they'd been answered fully and had nothing left to ask without it being them, now, who were the work. The older one called the younger one back with one word. The engine took them off across the heaps, the lights jolting and gone, and the river-sound came back into the gap they left.

"You let me," Nadia said, sitting again. Not quite a question.

"It's your gate." He pushed the shades back up into his hair. "I'd only have made him curious. A foreigner who knows his way around a checkpoint is a more interesting foreigner than one who just sits there being no trouble." He found the bread again. "I work very hard at being no trouble."

She looked at him a moment longer than the line deserved.

The fire burned down. The workers found their places — the dig house, the bed of the truck, Saad and a blanket against the warm flank of the spoil heap. Faisal slept sitting up with the unkillable ease of a man who'd taught his body to take rest like water, wherever it pooled.

Jakobus did not sleep.

He'd known he wouldn't from the moment the moon came up too big behind the stair. It was always like this a couple of days either side of it — the wiring drew tight, the body ran hot, the floor of his sleep just lifted clean away and left him standing in the night with nothing under him. He'd stopped fighting it twenty years ago. You don't fight the tide; you learn what it does to the beach.

He left the warm circle and walked out toward the ziggurat in the moonlight, and his bare arms didn't feel the cold that had everyone else under blankets. The brick was silver now where it had been yellow. He went up the great reconstructed stair — the splint, Nadia's word, the 1960s courses laid honest over the bone — and somewhere past the modern work his hand found the old, found the place where

a man five thousand years dead had pressed his thumb into wet bitumen and gone on to the next brick without thinking he'd left anything at all.

Jakobus put his thumb where the thumb had been. The fit was nothing — bigger hand, different shape, no message in it. That was the whole of it. No message. Just two men, far apart, who'd both been put to work moving heavy things in the heat, and one of them happened to be standing here now in the moon, and the other was the structure under his feet, holding the river off the houses, still doing the job after every empire that had ever leaned on it had gone to dust.

It had been looted. Nadia had stood right here and told him so, flat, no drama in it — the museum emptied, the cylinder seals out in trucks in '03, the slow grind of weather and want since. It was disappearing. That was true, and she'd said it plainly, and it was the deadline he had come east to stand in front of.

And it was still here. Both at once. The thing took the loss and the thing remained, and there was no contradiction in it that he could find, standing on the silver stair with the wind off the Euphrates trying for his bare arms and not getting them. The men at the fire would dig tomorrow. The boy had it memorised brick by brick. The niece would get a trowel into it if there was anything to put a trowel into — and there would be, because someone stubborn enough was standing over it tonight while a stranger who couldn't sleep walked her stones.

He stayed up there a long time, the way a man stays awake on a full moon — not waiting for anything, not deciding anything, just being in the room the world had left standing.

Below, the fire had gone to coals, and he could just make out Nadia where she'd stopped, near the bottom of the stair, looking up at him in the dark and not coming up. Letting him have it. Not asking what he was doing. Stubborn people knew the look of another one keeping a vigil he couldn't have explained if he'd tried.

In the morning there would be Babylon, and a gate they had rebuilt, and she had told him not to call it fake. He thought he might manage that. He thought, here on the old brick with the moon refusing to let him down, that he was beginning to learn the difference between a splint and a lie — and that it was going to cost him something to

keep learning it, the way the eating had cost him and the listening had cost him and the staying always did.

He did not go down. The moon held him up there until it was nearly grey in the east, and he let it.

Chapter 5 — Babylon's Gate

The road north out of Nasiriyah ran flat and white through palm groves gone half to salt, and Nadia talked the whole way about bricks.

Not casually. She talked about bricks the way a surgeon talks about a wrist — the firing temperature, the bitumen mortar the Babylonians used instead of lime because lime needs limestone and the alluvium gives you none, the stamped names of kings pressed into the wet clay before the kiln. *Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, provider of Esagila and Ezida, eldest son of Nabopolassar*. Stamped on hundreds of thousands of them, she said, so no man could lift a brick from that city and not know whose city it had been.

Jakobus drove and let her run. Faisal had gone back south to his family; the truck Nadia had arranged was a white Hilux with a State Board of Antiquities sticker peeling off the rear glass and an air-conditioner that worked if you didn't ask it to. He kept the shades on against the glare off the road and his pulse where he wanted it — low and patient today. The full-moon edge had passed three nights back. He'd slept a little. Not much.

"You are not asking questions," Nadia said.

"I'm listening."

"Most foreigners ask questions to show me they read something on a screen."

"I read a screen too," he said. "But the brick's in your hands, not mine."

She looked at him sideways and let it go, which he'd learned was how

she said *good answer*.

The checkpoint stood four kilometres short of the site — a Hesco wall, a boom, two soldiers in the shade of a corrugated lean-to, and a third, older, with the particular stillness of a man who decides things. Jakobus took the shades off before the truck had fully stopped, set them on the dash glass-down, and put both hands where they could be seen on the wheel.

Nadia did the talking. She handed across the survey permit, the Antiquities letter, the second letter naming him a photographer on contract to a heritage-documentation NGO — true enough at the edges to survive a phone call, which was all any cover ever had to do. The young soldier carried the papers to the older one, who read them slowly, the way you read when you can't, then the way you read when you can and are pretending you can't, to buy time.

"He says," Nadia translated, flat, not turning her head, "that there is a fee. For the survey vehicle. Today."

"There's always a fee," Jakobus said, in the same flat register, not at her, at the windscreen.

The fee was never about the money. The money was nothing — a few thousand dinar, the price of being allowed to keep moving — and a man who paid it too fast told you he was frightened, and a man who refused it told you he thought he was above the road. Jakobus reached, without hurry, for the cardboard box of dates Nadia had bought at a stall in Nasiriyah — the good ones, *barhi*, still on the little branch. He opened the lid and held it out the window toward the young soldier, who looked at it, then at the older man. The older man looked at the dates a long moment and then said something short.

Nadia exhaled, almost soundless. "He says the dates are from a good seller. He says go." She put the truck in gear herself, reaching across, before the man could reconsider. "You did not pay him."

"I gave him something he could take in front of his men without it being a bribe," Jakobus said. "A bribe makes him small. Dates from a good seller make him a man who knows dates. Different door."

"Where did you learn that?"

“Other walls.”

He had seen the photographs. Everyone had — the blue glaze, the gold lions and bulls and the long-necked *mušḫuššu* dragon of Marduk striding the brick — but the photographs were of Berlin, where the real gate had been carried away in crates over a hundred years ago and rebuilt inside a museum under a roof. What stood here was something else.

It came up out of the flat ground all at once: a high arch of brick, ochre and pale, the silhouettes of the animals raised in relief but unglazed, plain. Around its base the ground fell away into low broken courses, a maze of mudbrick stubs going to powder in the sun, and over that the modern wall rose new and square, the courses too even, the mortar too grey — stamped, he saw as they parked and walked in, with a name that was not Nebuchadnezzar’s.

He stopped and read it. He didn’t need the Arabic; the Latin transliteration was set right into the brick in the row above the ancient stamps. A dictator’s vanity pressed into a king’s tradition — *in the era of the leader Saddam Hussein* — the rebuilt city laid over the dead one like new skin over a wound that had not closed.

“There,” Nadia said quietly. “Now you have the whole argument in one wall.”

A young man came across the gravel to meet them, fast, smiling, a satchel banging his hip — late twenties, a checked shirt, a folding tripod under one arm. Nadia raised a hand. “Ziad. He guides here. Knows the new wall better than I do. He grew up at the foot of it.”

Ziad shook Jakobus’s hand with both of his. “You are the photographer.” Good English, eager. “You will want the gate in the morning light. Everyone does. But the gate is the lie everyone photographs and goes home happy.”

“Ziad,” Nadia said.

“It is a *good* lie,” Ziad said, turning, already walking them in, already mid-argument with a teacher he plainly loved. “I do not say tear it down. I say tell people what it is. They come, they see blue lions—” he gestured up at the unglazed arch “—and there are no blue lions,

the blue lions are in Germany, and these are not even on the old foundation. They built this gate twenty metres off the true line because it looked better for the photograph—”

“It is on a foundation,” Nadia said. “It is on *a* foundation.”

“A *foundation*. Not *the* foundation.”

“And in nineteen-eighty, when they laid it, the alternative to a foundation in the wrong place was a hole in the ground and grazing goats and a man from the ministry with no money. You forget that part. You were not born.”

“I am living in the part that came after,” Ziad said, and the heat went out of it, and he laughed, and Nadia almost did. Jakobus walked between them and said nothing, because they were saying it all, and it was not his to say.

They went down into the old courses where the new wall did not reach. Here the brick was small and pale and the joints were black — the bitumen, exactly as Nadia had described it on the road, tar from the river seeps troweled between courses fifty generations ago and still holding, still slightly tacky to a fingernail in the heat. He crouched and laid his palm flat against it.

The difference was in the hand before it was in the head. The modern brick up at the gate was sharp-edged, kiln-uniform, cool and dead. This was warm, the edges gone soft, rounded by hands and weather and the long settling of the city into itself — and there were the tool-marks, the drag of a wooden form, the thumb-press where a worker had levelled the mortar and moved on to the next, and the next, four thousand of them in a day, a man whose name was nowhere and whose thumb was right here under Jakobus's own. He stayed crouched longer than a photographer would.

“You feel it,” Ziad said above him. Not a question.

“Ja,” Jakobus said. “I feel it.”

“That is the thing I cannot make the tour buses feel. They photograph the gate. The gate is for the camera. *This*—” Ziad crouched too, put his own hand down beside the foreigner's “—this is for the hand. And the hand is harder to sell.”

The pump was behind the rest-house, and it was killing a man's whole afternoon.

A site worker, grey-bearded, was wrestling a recalcitrant Honda generator-pump rig that fed the standpipe — the only running water on the site, for the staff and the few visitors and the dust-suppression on the path. It ran, coughing, and put out nothing, and he hauled on the cord and swore the soft tired swearing of a man who has hauled on it forty times.

Jakobus watched for the length of three pulls. Then he set his satchel on the wall and went over and said, in his deliberately wrong, learned-from-people Arabic, *may I look*, and held his hands out flat, palms up, the way you ask to hold someone's child.

The man stepped back, more from surprise than permission.

It took four minutes. The engine ran fine — that was the trap, that was why the man had spent an hour on the cord — so the engine was not the problem. He laid his ear near the pump head, then took the priming cap off with the back of one of his folding knives. The impeller chamber was dry, and dry meant air, and air meant a perished gasket on the suction side where the line came up out of the cistern. He pulled the hose, found the split — a hairline in the rubber where it had baked against the hot block — and there was no spare, so he did the thing the kit was for. Cut a thumb-width of the old hose back to clean rubber, slid the line onto a brass barb he had no business carrying and carried anyway, dressed it with a turn of self-amalgamating tape from the waistcoat, primed the chamber from the worker's own water bottle held to the cap, and pulled the cord once.

Water came up out of the standpipe in a brown rope, then ran clear.

The grey-bearded man stared at it, then at Jakobus, then put a hand flat on his own chest and bowed his head. Another worker had come round the corner during it, and a third, and they were talking over each other now, the fast warm overlapping he could not separate into words but did not need to. He gathered the cut hose and the cap and the tape back into the waistcoat without ceremony and said, in the wrong Arabic, *it will hold for a season; tell them to carry a spare gasket*. The grey-bearded man laughed at that — at *carry a spare*, at

the whole ministry that never did — and clapped him once on the shoulder, hard, the way men clap a man they have decided about.

Nadia watched from the rest-house door with her arms folded. She said nothing. But the next time she looked at him there was a small re-calibration in it, the same one the soldiers' papers had gone through and come out the far side of.

A pump fixed bought him more here than the permit did. The permit said a ministry had let him in. The pump said the men on the ground would not mind that he had been.

In the late heat — he was paying it down now, the still high-thirties of the afternoon pressing on him the way it always did, the one weather he had no trick for — he stood in the shade of the new wall and drank water like a man paying a tax and let Ziad do the moving. The guide walked him along the joint where the rebuild met the ruin and told him what was under it.

The processional way, he said, the real one, ran *there*, under the modern paving they'd laid for tour groups; you could see two metres of it in a sondage pit they kept covered with plywood, the actual flagstones Nebuchadnezzar's masons set, each carved on its underside with the king's claim so that even the part walked on by a thousand years of sandals declared itself to the earth beneath. Staged, he said, pointing at the lion-relief panels low on the gate — modern, casts, decoration. Authentic, he said, pointing at a single panel near the base the rebuilders had left exposed: a fragment of the original glazed brick, a lion's haunch in faded blue, the only real colour on the whole monument, set behind a sheet of scratched perspex like a relic in a poor church. Lost, he said — and here he stopped pointing, because there was nothing to point at — lost was most of it: the libraries already gone before the foreigners came, the tablets in foreign museums, the tells dug into by armies who'd parked their vehicles on Nebuchadnezzar and dug their latrines into Hammurabi and not known, or not cared.

"And the gate," Ziad said. "The gate they argue about. Nadia is right and I am right. It is a fake in the wrong place. And it is the only reason anyone in Baghdad remembers there is a Babylon to fund at all. So." He spread his hands. "What do you want me to tell the

tourists. The truth has two sides and they both win.”

Jakobus drank his water. “Tell them both. People can hold two.”

Ziad looked at him. “Most cannot.”

“Most aren’t asked to.”

He went back alone at the hour the buses had gone, when the light came in low and gold under the arch and warmed the unglazed brick almost to the colour the glaze had been, so that for a few minutes a man could squint and see the dead city the way it had wanted to be seen.

He had come north with a quiet contempt sitting somewhere under his ribs — for the dictator’s name in the brick, for the foundation moved twenty metres for a photograph, for the lions that were not lions. The whole thing offended the part of him that loved an honest tool: the boots that were exactly what they claimed, the pump that did one thing well. A fake on the wrong line, dressed up for a camera.

But he had felt the old bitumen go tacky under his nail, and that was real and still here, and the only reason it was still here — the only reason the buses came at all, the only reason a man stood on a generator-pump keeping water on the path, the only reason a young guide had a job standing at the foot of his own childhood arguing with the woman who’d taught him — was the fake. The lie in the brick was a splint, the same as Ur’s was a splint, and you did not call the splint false because it was not the bone. It held the arm while the arm could not hold itself. It was not honest and it was survival, and he had spent the afternoon learning that those two words did not cancel.

He laid his hand a last time flat against the old course, on the tool-mark, on the dead man’s thumb. He did not photograph it. Some things were for the hand, and the hand was harder to sell, and he was not selling.

Nadia waited by the truck with Ziad, and they were still arguing, gently now, about whether the sondage pit should be opened to the public or kept covered against looters — Ziad for showing it, Nadia for keeping it dark — and neither of them turned to ask the foreigner what he

thought, which was exactly right.

The soldier at the boom on the way out lifted the bar before they reached it, and lifted two fingers off the stock of his rifle in something that was almost a wave. Jakobus put the shades back on against the falling sun and pointed the white truck north, toward Mosul, where what was missing would not be argued about. There was nothing left there to call a splint.

Chapter 6 — Under Babylon's Walls

The cot was an army-surplus folding thing in the corner of a prefab the site staff used for storing crates and shade, and Nadia offered it with the air of a woman who expected him to refuse and was prepared to be unimpressed if he did.

"The road north is bad after dark," she said. "And there is a storm building. You felt the wind change at four."

He had. The afternoon had gone the colour of weak tea, the date palms beyond the compound fence turning their leaves over to show the pale undersides — a thing that meant the same in the Free State as it meant here. He looked at the cot. He looked at her.

"I'd be grateful," he said, and meant it, and watched her file the grace of the answer the way she filed everything.

They ate in the small room with the gas ring, the three of them — Nadia, Ziad, him — on crates around a low metal tray. Bread, a dish of beans gone soft and dark with cumin, a bowl of yoghurt thinned with water, a plate of the dates he'd not given to the soldier. He ate everything put in front of him and reached for more when the gesture said reach, and Ziad watched him do it and decided something about him, the way the workers at the pump had decided something.

"You are not squeamish," Ziad said. Not quite a question.

"I get hungry," Jakobus said. "Squeamish is for men who have a choice about the next meal."

Nadia tore bread. "He ate from the Nubian cup," she said, to Ziad,

then to Jakobus: "Faisal told me. The communal cup. Everyone else holding their plastic bottles like —" She made a small clutching gesture, mocking and tired at once.

"Best water I ever drank." He said it flat, and Ziad laughed, surprised into it, and the room got warmer than the gas ring made it.

The first gust hit the prefab like a hand. The bulb on its wire swung, and Jakobus was up before either of them — not fast, just first, the body that had spent twenty years getting up before the rest of the room without being asked. "The tarps," he said. Ziad was already standing.

Outside, the world had gone brown and loud. Sand came sideways and got into the teeth. Over the open trenches where the season's work lay exposed — sections of original course they'd cleaned and were recording, the brick that mattered, the bone under Saddam's splint — the wind had got under one corner and was working it like something trying to take a confession. Two workers had it by the near edge and were losing.

He didn't shout. There was nothing to shout over that the wind wouldn't win. He went to the loose corner, dropped to a knee in the grit, put his weight on it; then his hands found the grommet and the cord and the lump of broken masonry the workers had been using to weight it. He re-rove the cord through the grommet and around the masonry in a figure-of-eight that wouldn't slip, hands working in the dark by feel because his eyes were full of sand. He'd tied this knot on a Cruiser's load in worse. He tied it now.

"Stake," he said, to the worker nearest, in the Arabic he'd learned from people and not from a book, and the man heard the *from-us* in it and didn't ask twice — came back with a length of rebar. Jakobus drove it through the soft ground with the heel of his palm against the masonry, hauled the cord taut, and the tarp stopped breathing and lay flat and held. They did the next one faster. Ziad worked beside him, quick and clever, and a worker named — he caught it through the wind — Mahmoud took the third with his own knot, a good knot, and Jakobus left it and didn't improve it.

By the time the four of them got back inside they were brown to the eyebrows and breathing hard, and the storm sat down on the compound and stayed. Nadia handed round water and looked at the

three men leaving brown handprints on everything.

“You did not have to,” she said. She meant the tarps. She meant the trenches were her responsibility and not his.

“It’s the season’s work,” he said. “You don’t let the season’s work blow into the next province.” He wiped his hands on the back of his trousers and not on the clean hanky, and she clocked that too, though she didn’t know why a man would keep one square of cloth spotless in all that filth.

The lights went at half past nine.

Not a flicker — gone, the whole compound and the city glow beyond it dropping into nothing, the storm having reached out and pulled the line somewhere in the dark. Nadia made a small sound of pure exhaustion, a woman to whom this had happened a thousand times and would happen a thousand more, and Ziad started fumbling for his phone, and before either of them had thumbed a screen alive a clean white cone of light lay across the tray, steady, throwing their shadows huge on the wall.

Jakobus had the headtorch in his hand. He hadn’t seemed to reach for it. It was the kind of thing the waistcoat gave up without being asked.

“Generator?”

“In the morning. There is fuel for the morning.” Nadia rubbed her face. “At night we sit in the dark, and the looters love a power cut, so somebody walks the wall, and tonight that is Yusuf, who is sixty-three, with a torch the size of —” She held up her thumb and finger, a small bitter inch. “I will give him this.” She reached for the headtorch.

“He can have a better one.” There was a spare in the vest, a real one, and a packet of cells, and he set them on the tray in the cone of his own light. Nadia looked at the two torches the way she’d looked at the pump after it ran. He saw her recalibrate him again and was sorry, a little, every time she had to, because it meant she’d been right to be careful and the world had taught her to be.

She told him things then, in the dark, the way people do when the light is off and a storm is holding the door. Not gossip. The shape of the work.

"The looters are organised now," she said. "It is not boys with shovels. It is men with a list and a truck and somewhere to sell. They know what a cylinder seal goes for in Geneva. They take what is small and high in value and leave the brick, because brick does not travel." A silence. "The soldiers are sometimes the looters. Or they sell the looters a quiet hour. Or they are honest and underpaid and we give them dates." A dry glance toward him in the torchlight. "And the bureaucracy —" she let out a breath that was nearly a laugh. "The permit to record the trench takes longer than the trench survives. I have a colleague who waited two years for a permit to consolidate a wall, and in the second year the wall fell, and they sent the permit anyway. He has it framed."

Ziad said something low in Arabic, and she answered it, and Jakobus let them have it in their own tongue and didn't ask for the translation.

"You stay anyway," he said, when it came round to him.

"It is mine to stay." No weight on it, which was how he knew it was the whole weight. "Whose else?"

He turned the torch a little so it wasn't in her eyes. The shades had been off since the dark came; there was no uniform here and nothing to read but two tired people who'd let him in, and the eyes had nothing to hide from them. He wanted to give her something back, in the currency the night was trading in, and he didn't have a trench or a wall.

"There's a country I can't go to," he said.

The wind worked at the prefab. Nadia waited.

"In Africa. The most beautiful thing I ever saw. I was there for — work. Not the kind you put on a permit." He turned the date in his fingers and didn't eat it. "The work ended and they kept my name. There's a list at every post. So." He set the date down. "Whose else is it to stay? I don't get to stay. I get to come and look at other people's beautiful places and then leave those too — but mine I can't even leave from. I can't even stand in it to be told to go." He heard himself and stopped, because that was already more than the dark had asked for.

"You miss a country the way I am afraid of losing a wall," Nadia said slowly.

“Something like.”

“It is not the same.”

“No,” he agreed, because it wasn’t, and because the not-being-the-same was the respect. “Yours is still there. You can still touch yours. You just have to keep the truck and the men and the Geneva buyers off it, and the permit late, and the soldiers honest. Mine I just —” he opened his hand, the one with the continent dark on the forearm in the torchlight. “Mine I keep on my arm.”

Ziad leaned and looked at the tattoo, at the shape of it, and didn’t ask, and Jakobus was grateful for the not-asking the way he was grateful for the cot.

After a while he stood. “I’ll walk the wall with Yusuf,” he said. “Two torches see more than one.”

Outside, the storm had thinned to a hard wind and a sky clearing in patches, stars coming through over the broken city, the city glow gone with the power, so that for once Babylon stood the way Babylon had mostly stood — dark, and large, and minding its own ruin. He found the old man at the foot of the reconstructed wall, the splint wall, Saddam’s wall, his thumb-sized torch making a thumb-sized hole in the night. They walked it together, the new courses on their left running smooth and machined, the old line somewhere off to the right under the dark, and Jakobus thought, walking, that you could keep a thing alive in a war zone only by deciding, every single night, in the dark, with a sixty-three-year-old’s torch, that it was worth one more night of your own life. There was no prize at the end of that decision. There was only the next night, and the looters loving a power cut, and the permit coming after the wall had already fallen.

Yusuf talked as they walked, and Jakobus let him, the old man’s Arabic slow and unhurried, the dialect of somewhere south, most of it followed and some of it let wash past. There had been a night, Yusuf said — he stopped and pointed his small light at a gap in the new wall where a service road ran in — a night two winters back, no moon, and a truck came up that road with its lights off, which an honest truck does not do. Three men. Cutting tools and a list, the way Nadia had said, and they went for the magazine where the season’s small finds were locked, the seals and the beads, the things that travel.

"And you," Jakobus said.

"And I am one old man with a telephone that did not work." Yusuf laughed, low. He had not run. He had walked toward the truck — *walked*, he made the word slow with his hand — into the lights when they came on, into the middle of the road, and stood there, an old man in the road, and said that the police were coming, which was a lie, and that he had seen their faces, which was true, and that this was not a place a man wanted his face seen. And he had not moved. And after a while — a long while, the old man said, the longest while of his life — the truck had backed down the service road and gone, because three men with a list do not want one old man's certainty about their faces; certainty is expensive, and they were there to make money, not spend it.

"They came back the next month for the magazine at Tell —" he named a site Jakobus didn't know. "It is gone now, that one. The seals are in Geneva." He shrugged, the whole history of the crescent in it. "Here they did not come back. Because of one night, maybe. Or maybe they only forgot us. Who knows why a thing survives."

Jakobus stood in the service road where the old man had stood, felt the cold come off the bricks, and did not say *that was brave*, because the old man had not done it to be brave; he had done it because it was his to stay and no one else was there — the same flat arithmetic as Nadia's *whose else*. He recognised it the way you recognise your own face in a window you didn't expect to be glass. It was the thing he'd spent a life calling something harder, in himself.

"Go and sleep, Ammo," Yusuf said, naming him uncle, easy, unbidden. "I have walked this wall a thousand nights. Tonight there are two of us, and a good torch, and the looters can read a good torch from far." He smiled in the dark. "Tomorrow you go to Mosul. There they did not get to walk the wall in time."

Jakobus left him the spare batteries and walked back across the compound under the clearing sky, the wind dropped now, and somewhere out in the dark the season's trenches lay flat and held under their tarps, and a sixty-three-year-old man stood between a list and a memory because it was his. In the morning there would be fuel for the generator, and a permit that hadn't come, and a road north to a place where the walking had been too late.

He lay on the cot in his clothes and did not sleep much, the way of him a few nights either side of any change in the sky, and he listened to Babylon mind its own ruin, and he thought of the country on his arm that he could not stand in to be told to go, and he understood, finally, why he kept coming to the unvisitable places: they would still let him in. That was the whole of it. They would still let him in, and ask him to hold a tarp, and tell him their fears in the dark, and then he could leave — but he got to be let in first.

It was not enough. He got up before light anyway, to make the coffee, because the difference between a hard week and an unbearable one was whether you could make yourself one decent thing at the end of it, or the start.

Chapter 7 — Checkpoint

North

They left before the light, which was right, because the light made you a thing on a road and the dark made you only a sound, and a sound could be anyone.

Three vehicles. Nadia's white Land Cruiser with the Antiquities crest peeling off the door; a flatbed with two of Yusuf's nephews and a load of empty crates that gave the convoy a reason anyone could understand; and a battered Hilux Jakobus rode in the back of, behind a driver named Saleh who had a prayer bead worn smooth as river stone hung off the mirror and a cassette deck that did not work. Jakobus did not offer to fix it. Some things a man kept because they didn't work.

He was the only foreigner. He felt it the way you feel weather coming — not fear, just a pressure on one side of the skull, the knowledge that of all the bodies in these three trucks his was the one that changed an arithmetic. He sat low. He kept his hands in his lap, nails clipped square, clean. He had learned a long time ago that you became less by sitting still, and less was what he wanted to be today, all the way to Mosul.

The first checkpoint came up out of the grey at the edge of a town whose name Saleh said and Jakobus filed by its shape. Official. Army, real army, a concrete chicane and a man in the road with a torch and the bored aggression of a soldier four hours into a twelve-hour shift. Jakobus took the shades off before the truck stopped, folded them into the waistcoat, let his eyes — grey this morning, cool and tired and giving nothing because there was nothing he was holding back

from this man — be the first thing the torch found.

“*Salaam alaykum*,” he said, before the soldier could decide anything. The dialect came up out of him the way it always did, not the radio Arabic of an embassy but the swallowed, easy thing he’d learned at a hundred fires, the *aleikum* run soft into the next breath. “*Asch akhbarak. Sabah el-kheir, ya rayyis*.”

The torch held on him a half-second longer than it would have on an Iraqi, then moved off, because a foreigner who greeted him as *rayyis* — boss, chief, the small free dignity of the word — in his own swallowed tongue was a problem that solved itself faster than it announced. Nadia’s papers did the rest from the lead truck. The soldier waved them through with the torch, a flick of light like a man brushing off a fly, and they were past, and Jakobus put the shades back on as the town fell behind, and breathed.

“You talk like a man from down there,” Saleh said over his shoulder, meaning south, meaning Faisal’s country. “Not from a book.”

“I learned it from people,” Jakobus said. “Books make you sound like you’re being paid to say it.”

Saleh laughed, the first real thing between them, and the prayer bead swung.

The land changed as the sun came up over it. He watched it the way he read everything, not for what it was but for what it had been. The flat ran out into low country cut by lines too straight to be natural — old channels, the ghost-grid of irrigation laid down by people who had moved water across this plain when his own ancestors were painting rocks. Some of the channels still held a green seam down their length. Most were dry and pale, a field that died and a field that died and a field that died, on and on, the work of ten thousand years going quietly back to dust because the men who knew the gates were dead or gone and the new men had other wars.

He saw a bridge that wasn’t a bridge any more. Both ends still reached toward each other over a dry cut, and the middle was simply gone — a clean bite out of it, the rebar curled up like dead grass at the broken edges, and below it in the wadi the truck the bridge had killed, rusted now, a long time killed. They forded the cut beside it

where a thousand tyres had beaten a way down and up. The tyres knew. He let the thought sit and didn't finish it.

The second checkpoint was not the army.

He read it before Saleh slowed — read it in the wrongness of it, the flag he didn't recognise strung between two oil drums, the men too young and too armed and not bored, which was worse than bored, because bored was a job and not-bored was a thing a man did because somebody had told him he mattered now and he believed it. Militia. Local. Somebody's. No concrete chicane here, just the drums and a string and four boys with rifles too clean to have done much except be pointed.

"Inta meen?" — who are you — said the one who came to Saleh's window, the youngest of them, which was the danger, the way the youngest dog in a pack is the danger because he has the most still to prove. He had a soft beard that hadn't decided yet and eyes that moved too fast, snagging on every wrong thing — the empty crates, the crest on Nadia's door up front, and then, sliding back along the convoy, finding Jakobus in the bed of the Hilux. They held there. Snagged.

Jakobus took the shades off. Slow. Put them away. Let the boy see his eyes.

It didn't land the way it had landed on the army man. The boy's gaze went tighter, not looser — a foreigner this far north, in the back of a local truck, was a thing that fit no story he'd been given, and a soldier with nothing in his head but the speech somebody filled it with reaches, when the story breaks, for the only tool he's sure of. He came down the side of the truck, rifle slung but his hand finding the strap. *"Iftah,"* he said. *Open it.* He gestured at Jakobus's bag, the canvas roll under the bench, the waistcoat heavy on Jakobus's shoulders with the small honest weight of its pockets. *"Kullo." All of it.*

And here was the place. Jakobus knew it the way you know the lip of a thing in the dark with your foot. The boy wanted the kit out on the dirt because the kit on the dirt would give him back his story — knives, cord, tools, the litter of a man who was clearly more than a man with a bag — and once it was on the dirt the boy would have to be somebody about it, in front of the other three, and there would be

no quiet road down from that for either of them.

Jakobus did not reach for the bag. He sat very still and held the boy's eyes and made his own as empty as a cup. "*Tahta amrak,*" he said, gentle, in the dialect. *At your command. Hands open on his knees. I am no trouble; I am the least trouble you will see today.*

The boy's hand stayed on the strap.

Then Nadia was out of the lead truck and walking back down the convoy, and she did not hurry, and she did not look at Jakobus once, which was the whole skill of it. She came to the boy in his own register, fast and warm and a little exasperated, the crest of the Antiquities on a lanyard already in her hand and the permit already unfolding, talking before she arrived so the talking arrived first — and Jakobus, who could not follow all of it at that speed, followed the shape: *this man is mine, a foreigner from a heritage office, he photographs old stones, look, here, the letter, the stamp, he is boring, he is paperwork, do you want to be the man who held the antiquities convoy and made the office in Baghdad write your name down?* — and somewhere in it she used the boy's commander's name, a name she could not have known he answered to except that she had spent her whole life learning whose names mattered on which stretch of road, and the boy's spine changed.

He let go of the strap. He looked at the permit because looking at the permit was a way to stop looking at Jakobus and keep his face. He gave it back. He stepped away from the truck and waved them on with the rifle, careless now, performing the carelessness, and Jakobus gave him nothing, no nod, no thanks, no flicker of the relief running cold down his back under the waistcoat — because thanks would have made it a thing that had happened, and the kindest thing he could do for the boy was let it be nothing.

The string came down off the drums. They drove through.

He put the shades back on a kilometre later, when the drums were gone from the mirror, and his hands were steady because he made them steady, and he thought about Nadia not looking at him, and how that was the truest care anyone had shown him in a long while — to defend him by pretending he wasn't worth defending. *The locals are the shield.* He'd said something like that to himself in the dark at Babylon and it had been a tradecraft thought, cold, an asset

assessment. It wasn't cold now. He'd had no wrist to fold and no border to read and no gap in the ground, and a woman who studied dead cities had walked into the only weapon that worked here, which was knowing whose name to say, and had spent a little of her own standing to keep his kit off the dirt.

He couldn't have done it. That was the thing he sat with as the land rolled. There was no version of him that solved that checkpoint. His whole life was the gap, the read, the way out, and there had been no way out of that one that he could open with his own hands. He had been cargo, and the cargo had been saved by the people who knew the water.

There was a third checkpoint and a fourth, and he stopped counting them as events and started counting them as weather. Some official, some not, the not-official ones thicker the further north they went, the flags multiplying, every twenty kilometres a different small kingdom with a different string across the road. He read each one and took the shades off for each one and said the right soft thing in the right swallowed tongue, and twice it was enough on its own and the rest of the time Nadia's name-magic finished it, and he came to understand the country he was crossing the way you understand a river by the colour of its water — not by being told but by what it did to the trucks.

At a stop where they waited an hour for a man with the authority to let them past, Jakobus climbed out and stood with Saleh in the shade of the Hilux, and they smoked the thin cigarettes Jakobus rolled, and Saleh told him things, in the unhurried way of a man passing an hour, that no permit could have told him. Whose drums these were. How the army held the road by day and somebody else held the night. How the man they were waiting for was nobody's enemy and nobody's friend, which was the only safe thing left to be. How a year ago this stretch had answered to a different flag, and a year before that to the army alone, and how nobody who lived along it bothered learning the flags any more, only the faces, because the flags changed and the faces, mostly, did not.

"You learn the man at the drum," Saleh said. "Not the drum."

"Ja," Jakobus said. Yes. "The man at the drum."

The man with the authority came eventually, an old man, unhurried, who looked at Jakobus a long time and then at Nadia's papers a longer time and then waved them on without a word, and they were past, and Saleh let out a breath and turned the dead cassette deck on out of habit and turned it off again.

Mosul came up at them out of the haze of the late afternoon, and you saw it long before you arrived, and what you saw first were the wounds.

The city lay along its river in a brown sprawl, and from the road the eye went to the places where the sprawl had been broken — whole blocks pressed flat, the particular grey rubble-colour of a building that had been a building and was now only the powder of itself, repeated, a neighbourhood of it, two, the dead patches laid into the living city like the dry channels laid into the green plain. There were minarets standing and minarets that ended halfway up in a torn stump. A span of the old bridges across the river simply stopped over the water the way the bridge that morning had stopped over the wadi. Smoke stood up somewhere on the far side, the ordinary smoke of someone burning rubbish, and a flock of birds turned over the broken quarter in the slant light, and the whole thing was unbearably beautiful and unbearably plain — a city full of people doing the evening's work in the bones of a city that had been killed and was refusing, stubbornly, in its own time, to stay dead.

Jakobus took the shades off, though there was no uniform here, no torch, no boy with a strap. He took them off because you did not look at a thing like that through dark glass. Nadia's truck had slowed ahead of him and he could see the shape of her in the cab, not moving, looking at the same thing he was looking at, and he understood that for her this was not a wound on the road. This was the place a friend was. This was a thing somebody was trying to carry back up out of the dust on a season's budget and a borrowed flatbed, the way Yusuf carried the wall through the dark, alone, against people who came for it with trucks.

He had come to see what remained. There it was, remaining, in the slant light, and it was not his to say what it meant, and the people who would tell him were down there in it, already at the work, and the

road ran on toward them through one more checkpoint he could see now at the city's edge, drums and a string and small figures, the last gate before the worst of it.

He did not reach for the cord on his wrist or the stone in his pocket. He sat with his bare eyes on the broken minarets and waited for Saleh to drive him in.

Chapter 8 — The Lamassu's Shadow

The site was closed.

Jakobus saw it from the Hilux a kilometre out — the tape strung between two oil drums, the soldier sitting in the shade of an APC with his rifle across his knees the way a man holds something he is tired of carrying. Beyond the tape, the low mounds of Nineveh ran flat and brown to the horizon, the old walls of Sennacherib's city worn to swells in the ground, indistinguishable from the dust except by the way they refused to be ploughed.

Nadia had stayed in Mosul that morning. *Hakim will meet you*, she'd said. *He has the permit. If the permit still holds.* The way she said *if* had told him to expect this.

Saleh slowed without being told. Jakobus took the shades off and folded them into the chest pocket of the waistcoat before they reached the drum. The soldier's eyes came up. Young — not as young as the militia boy on the road, but young enough that the rifle was still a thing he held rather than a thing that had become part of him.

"As-salaamu alaykum," Jakobus said out the window, before the boy could decide who was in charge. He let the dialect sit where Saleh's sat — flat northern vowels, the swallowed ends. *Not a man from a book.* "We have a paper. For the digging." He used the word the labourers used, not the word the ministry used.

The soldier looked at the paper Saleh handed across. Looked at it a long time, the way men look at paper they cannot fully read and will

not admit it. "Closed," he said. "There was shooting. Two nights. Up the road." He pointed with his chin toward Mosul's broken teeth. "No one in."

"We are not going up the road. We are going to the stones." Jakobus kept his hands loose on the sill, palms a little open, the shades gone from his face so the boy could see he had nothing behind his eyes worth hiding. "The man who keeps the stones is waiting. He has the same paper."

The soldier was working something out, and what he was working out was not the permit. It was whether saying yes would cost him later. Jakobus had watched this arithmetic done at fifty gates on three continents. You could not argue a man out of it. You could only make yes the smaller risk.

"There is tea at the tent," Jakobus said. "You'll see us the whole time. We don't move except to the stones and back."

A second vehicle came up behind — a dented government Toyota, and out of it a man unfolded himself in a high-vis vest gone grey with dust, waving a laminated card and calling the soldier by name. Hakim. Had to be. He spoke fast and low and put his hand on the boy's shoulder twice, and whatever passed between them was older than the tape — neighbours and cousins and the long accounting of a small place. The boy lifted the drum. He did not look at the permit again.

"You made him decide it was easier to let you in," Hakim said in English, when the Hilux had passed through and stopped. He had a careful, almost shy face, late thirties, a beard kept short, hands too clean at the nails for the rest of him to be. "He nearly closed it on you. The shooting was real. The Antiquities directorate pulled half the permits this week. Mine they forgot, because I am not important enough to remember." He almost smiled. "Come. Before they remember."

The lamassu was in pieces under a sun shelter, and Jakobus stopped without meaning to.

He had seen the photographs, the way everyone had — the men with the jackhammer, the great winged thing standing patient under the

drill, the dust coming off it. The footage that played in airports. He had not understood, from the footage, the *scale*. The thing had stood five metres. The human head that had watched the gate of the city for twenty-seven centuries — the king's calm face, the layered beard cut in stone like cloth — was on a pallet now, in four large fragments and a tray of smaller ones, the gypseous alabaster pale and bruised. The bull's body was rubble sorted into crates by size. The wings — the wings had been the part that did it, in the old days, the great arc of feathers carved so a man could read each one — the wings were gravel.

"They drilled the face first," Hakim said beside him, not looking at it. "On the film. You saw. They knew the face was the part the world would weep for." He crouched and lifted a fragment the size of a loaf, turned it so Jakobus could see the curl of the beard still cut into one edge. "This is a real piece. From the original. We have maybe — thirty percent, by weight, of this one. The rest is dust and the dust is gone, swept up by the people who came after to sell. You could buy this dust in Geneva. The face of a king, by the gram."

Jakobus said nothing. There was an anger that came up in him at this kind of thing, fast and useless, the same anger that had no wrist to fold and no border to read, and he had learned long ago to let it pass over him and through. He looked at the tray of small pieces instead. Each one had a number inked on it in white. Each one had been picked up by a hand and turned and considered and given a place.

"Who numbers them," he said.

"Me. Three students from Mosul university, when they can come. An old man, Abu Salim, who worked here for the Iraqis before — before all of it. He is seventy. He remembers where pieces were before they fell. That is worth more than the laser machines they send us." Hakim set the fragment back into its exact place on the pallet, the way you set down a thing you have promised not to break further. "We photograph. We weigh. We mark. We make the drawing of where each piece sat. It is not fast."

"How long."

"For this one? Two years. Maybe we stand it up again. Maybe we never stand it up and it lives in a room and people walk past the

pieces and read what it was." Hakim straightened. "There is a debate about this. Loud men have the debate. I do the weighing."

A flatbed had come in behind them while they talked — Ziad's, with the larger fallen blocks from the gate foundation, the ones too heavy to have been worth a thief's truck. Hakim's people began to unload, three of them, and Jakobus watched them set the lifting straps and saw at once that they were two men short for the weight and the angle, that the block would swing as it came off, that someone's hand was going to be where the block was going to be.

He did not think about being cargo. He set his shades in the waistcoat and went.

"Other side," he said in the labourers' Arabic, taking the swinging corner before it found the student's wrist, planting his boots, letting his back and his legs take it the way you take a thing you cannot stop, only steer. The block came down onto the timbers wrong-side and he braced and walked it square with his shoulder while a man he'd never met read his weight and matched it without a word, the two of them turning two tons of foundation stone like a door on a hinge until it sat. The student let his breath out. Somebody laughed — the high laugh of a near-miss.

Hakim was watching him with a different face now.

"You've moved stone," Hakim said.

"I've moved everything." Jakobus flexed his hand, where the alabaster had taken a little skin. Clean nails, a little blood. He wiped it on the back of his trousers, not the hanky. "Where do you want the rest of them. I'll set the straps so they come off level. You're lifting them on the swing — that's how a man loses a finger he was using."

Hakim looked at him a moment longer than the offer needed. Jakobus knew the look. It was the look of a man deciding whether the foreigner who said *I'll help* meant *I'll help* or meant *watch what I can do*. The men who came through here mostly meant the second. They came with cameras and a fixer and a satellite phone and stood at the right distance and got their photograph with the broken king, meaning *look what I witnessed*, and were gone by dark, and the stones did not weigh one gram less for their having come.

“You can set the straps,” Hakim said.

So he set the straps. For three hours, in the heat that he could not beat and did not pretend to — he found the shade of the sun shelter between lifts, drank from the canvas bag slung on Ziad’s flatbed that wept and kept its water cold, spent exactly as long in the sun as the block in front of him required and then got out of it — he worked the lifts with Hakim’s two short crew until the fallen blocks were ranged on timbers in the order Abu Salim’s memory said they had once stood. He did not direct. He took the corner nobody could reach, read the weight, kept his hands where hands belonged; and when one of the students reached for a strap the wrong way he showed him the right way once, with his hands, no words, and the boy had it after that.

The old man, Abu Salim, came at the cool end of the afternoon, walked slowly down the line of blocks with a stick, stopped at one, put his free hand flat on it, and stood like that. Jakobus watched him from the shade. He knew that exact stillness — a man with his palm in the tool-marks of a thing, listening to it the way you listen to ground. The old man said something to Hakim and Hakim moved a block two places down the line, and Abu Salim nodded once and went on.

“He says that one stood beside the gate, not in it,” Hakim said. “The laser scan said the other order. The laser scan is wrong. He carried water past that block as a boy of nine.”

They drank tea at the tent as the light went long and ochre over the mounds. The soldier from the drum came and drank a glass, watching them the whole time as promised, then went back to his shade satisfied that nothing had been stolen on his watch. Jakobus sat on an upturned crate with his back to a tent-pole, the day’s work settling into his shoulders the way it would sit there worse tomorrow, and let Hakim talk, because Hakim, having decided something about him over the lifts, had begun to.

“You want to ask me the question,” Hakim said. “The loud men’s question. Why rebuild it. If we stand it up again it is not the lamassu. It is new stone where the old stone is dust, it is a copy with a true heart, it is — what did Ziad say to you at Babylon? I heard about your Babylon debate. The splint.” He turned his glass. “So. A copy. Why.”

Jakobus had been asked questions like this all his life and had learned that the honest answer was usually *because it isn't mine to say*. He said it.

"It isn't mine to say."

"No," Hakim agreed, pleased, as if Jakobus had passed something. "It is not. But I will tell you what I think, because it is mine to say, and you carried stone today, so you have bought one opinion." He drank. "They drilled the face to break us. Not the stone — us. To say: your history is nothing, we can erase it in an afternoon, and you will stand and watch and you will not be able to stop us. And we could not stop them. That is true. That happened." He set the glass down very precisely on the crate. "So now. Now we pick up every gram. We weigh it. We number it. We put it back, or we put it in a room, and either way we have said back to them, slowly, with our hands, over years: *no*. We are still here. The face you broke — we know which gram went where. You cannot erase a people who will spend two years on a beard."

He said it without heat. He said it the way Jakobus said the worst things — flat, plain, the delivery getting quieter as the content got heavier, a man who had set the rage down somewhere a long time ago because the rage did not number fragments and the numbering had to be done.

"It is not for the stone," Hakim said. "If it were for the stone we would let it lie. The stone does not care. It is for the next nine-year-old who carries water past it. So he grows up knowing they could not finish the job. *That* is what we rebuild. Not the bull. The not-finishing."

Jakobus looked at the broken king on the pallet, the pale face in four pieces under the dying light, the tray of numbered dust beside it. He had come up the whole crescent with an anger ready for this, a fixer's anger, the *let me at it, let me make it right*, and he understood now that there was nothing to make right, that the wound was real and old and would not close, and that the wonder was not the king and never had been. The wonder was the seventy-year-old with his palm on a block, correcting a laser. The wonder was a man two men short who weighed dust by the gram and called it *no*. The thing that could not be broken had never been in the stone. It was in the tent.

"You're short two men," Jakobus said.

“Always.”

“I’ll be here in the morning. Until Nadia needs me north.” He turned the tea glass in his clean-nailed hands. “I set the straps better than your boys. No offence to your boys.”

Hakim laughed — the first full laugh, surprised out of him. “They will be offended. Come anyway.” He stood, and looked once more at Jakobus, the shy carefulness gone from his face now, replaced by something that had decided. “You did not take a photograph. All day. The men who come — they take the photograph first. Before they say hello to the dead king, they stand beside him for the camera.”

“I couldn’t carry it home anyway,” Jakobus said. He pushed himself up off the crate, the day loud in his back. “I’ll just remember the weight of it.”

The soldier had lit a small fire at the drum against the coming cold, and the mounds of Nineveh had gone blue and then black, and somewhere past them the broken city held its two nights of shooting in the dark like a thing that was not finished either — that someone, tomorrow, with clean nails and no haste, would also have to begin numbering. Jakobus pulled the waistcoat closer over his bare arms and did not feel the cold, and watched the fire, and waited for the morning and the straps and the next gram of a king.

Chapter 9 — Mosul After Dark

The flat was on the third floor of a building that still wore its war on the outside — the stairwell pocked, a whole corner of the second landing sheared away and patched with breeze-block and good intentions — and inside was warm and full of frying onions and a kerosene lamp's old bite. Hakim had brought him here because Nadia's call had come through after dark, and a man did not drive the road north at night, not this one; and because, Hakim said, with the small shrug that carried his whole house behind it, *you cannot sleep on a site with no roof; come and sleep where there is a roof and a wife who will be insulted if you eat alone.*

Jakobus had learned long ago not to argue with that particular grammar.

Hakim's wife was Suad, and his mother lived with them, and there were two daughters and a son who came and went through the rooms like weather. The mother sat in the corner with the gravity of someone who had earned the corner. She watched Jakobus the way the old watch everyone, and he gave her the bare eyes — shades folded into the vest's top pocket the moment he came in off the dark street, because there were no streetlights to need them against, and because a house was a kind of checkpoint too, and the gatekeeper here was eighty and sharp as a chipped lamassu tooth.

They ate on the floor, the dishes set out on a cloth — rice gone gold with something, a stew of lamb and okra, flat bread torn and passed. Jakobus ate everything put in front of him, and ate it with his hand, the right hand, the way it was done; the mother in the corner narrowed

her eyes at that, and then, satisfied, looked away, which from her was a benediction. He praised the okra and meant it. Suad waved the praise off and put more on his plate, which was the same conversation in two directions.

His hands were clean. Bloodied across the knuckles from the day's stone, two nails split, but clean — scrubbed in the basin Hakim had pointed him to before they sat, the dirt of Nineveh gone from under them even if the day was not. His mother's rule, forty years carried: the clothes are the weather, the hands are the man. He sat among these people three days filthy and nails clipped square, and it was not nothing to them. He saw the daughter clock it — the small surprise.

The lights went out while they were eating.

Not a flicker — a clean drop, the whole building exhaling into dark at once, the kerosene lamp suddenly the only fact in the room. Nobody stopped chewing. The son got up without being asked and went out to the stairwell landing; a minute later a generator coughed somewhere below, caught, and settled into a flat industrial drone, and a single bulb came back overhead, browner than before, hesitant. The fan resumed a half-turn slower.

"It does that," Hakim said. "Twice a night. Sometimes three. The grid is a rumour."

"The generator's yours?"

"Half mine. Half the man downstairs. We share it like we share the stairs." He tore bread. "He thinks I take more than my half because I have three women and a boy. I think he runs his television all night. We are at peace about it because the alternative is more annoying than the fuel."

Jakobus understood that completely, and said so by saying nothing — only a tilt of the head over the okra. The drone settled into the floor under them, a constant, and he found his breath going to it the way it went to a bassline, the body reaching for the steady thing, and he let it. Twelve hundred RPM, more or less. Not far off the band he kept his own pulse near. He sat in a stranger's home in a broken city and his heart came down a notch on the hum of a diesel he could not see, and that was its own private comfort he would not have explained to anyone in the room.

After the food the daughters cleared and the talk loosened, the way it does, and Jakobus learned the shape of the house the way you learn a town for its exits — not because he meant to leave through any of them, but because it was how he read a place into himself.

The water tank, then. The son mentioned it the way a thing mentions itself when it has been waiting all day — that the rooftop tank had stopped filling, that the float was stuck or the pipe leaked, that the women had carried water up the broken stairs in jerry-cans for two days while Hakim had not had an hour of daylight to climb up and look. Hakim waved it off, the host's reflex — *not your trouble, eat, sit*. Jakobus finished his tea and stood up.

"Show me," he said. "I've got nothing else to do until your roads grow eyes."

They went up by the lamp and the smartwatch torch on his wrist, the stairwell narrowing to a ladder at the top, out onto the flat roof under a sky the war had given back one good thing: with the grid down most nights, the stars came in close. Across the rooftops other generators droned, a town of them, a low choir; here and there a single window held light, and the Tigris was a darker dark off to the west where the city's broken half lay — the Old City, where the lamassu had come from and where the rubble was still mostly rubble. Jakobus stood a second and let the wide ruined dark say what it said.

Then he found the tank.

A battered black plastic drum on a steel stand, and the problem was not subtle once you put a light on it: the inlet float arm had corroded through at the pivot and dropped, so the valve sat closed against a fill that never came; and the overflow pipe had a split where it had frozen one winter and nobody had got to it. He worked it out the way he worked everything out — by hand, by the geometry of it, the float wanting to rise and the arm not letting it. He did not announce the diagnosis. He started fixing the part that could be fixed tonight.

The son held the light. Jakobus took the dead float arm off, freed the valve, and found in the vest's many small pockets a length of stainless safety wire and the lipstick-sized mini pipe wrench he carried for exactly the moment when the world needed a small thing turned that

no large thing would reach. He fashioned the float arm a splint — and the word arrived in him with a small cold weight, Hakim's word from the tea on the site, *you do not say the splint is fake because it is not the bone*, and he let it sit where the boy could not see it. He wired the float to ride true, set the pivot so it would close clean when the tank filled, and bound the overflow split with a turn of self-amalgamating tape pulled from another pocket.

"There's a hose down at the standpipe?" he asked.

The son nodded. They ran the fill. The valve hissed and bit, and the float began, slowly, to rise; and somewhere below the women would hear the tank gulping and know, without being told, that tonight the water came back up the building on its own.

Hakim had come up at some point and stood watching from the ladder-head, not helping, which was right — it was his roof, and a guest does not take a man's roof from him, only mends it and hands it back. When Jakobus straightened, wiping his hands on the back of his trousers, the hanky staying clean in its pocket for whatever it was for, Hakim said, quietly, "You did not have to."

"No," Jakobus said. "But I had a wrench, and you had a wife carrying water up a broken stair. The two facts wanted to meet."

Hakim laughed — short, surprised, real — the first time Jakobus had heard him laugh, and he banked it.

They stayed up on the roof, the three of them, then four, the daughter bringing tea up on a tray because the night had become a sitting-up kind of night. The generators droned. The stars held. And Hakim told him the city, because the roof was the place you told it from, looking out over the dark where the worst of it had happened.

He did not tell it as a tragedy. He told it the way the old custodian had moved the stones — flat, precise, by memory, each fact set down in its place and weighed. The siege. The months. The bridges dropped one by one into the Tigris so the river became a wall through the middle of their own city. The Old City, house by house, street by street he could still name though half the streets were gone — he named them anyway, the way Abu Salim named where a stone had stood. The mother had not left. Suad had not left. *We sent the*

children for a while, Hakim said, and we did not go, because if you leave you are a number in a camp and your house is a thing the next man takes, and we are not numbers, we are people with an address. The mother, downstairs now, had stood in the doorway through the worst of it, eighty years old, and dared the war to come through her door, and somehow it had gone around.

"Many did leave," Jakobus said. Not a challenge. A door held open.

"Many left," Hakim agreed. "I do not judge them. A man with small children and a way out is a wise man. But we are the staying kind. My grandfather was the staying kind in a worse century than this." He turned his glass in his fingers. "It costs to stay. I will not tell you it does not. It costs every day, in small change — the water up the stairs, the grid that is a rumour, the boy who is afraid of a sound and pretends he is not. But it is the cost I have chosen, and a cost you choose is a different animal to a cost they put on you." He looked at Jakobus then, the lamp under-lighting his face. "You understand this. I saw it on the site. You are also a man who pays things on purpose."

Jakobus did not answer. He let it stand, which was its own kind of answer.

It was the daughter who asked him about home — the older one, sixteen or seventeen, the one who'd clocked his clean nails, with the directness the young have before the world teaches them to wrap it.

"Where are you from, that you can fix a tank in the dark and eat like a person and not take photographs?"

"Free State," he said. "South Africa. The high middle of it. Grass and sky and not much else, which is exactly enough." He told her a little of it, because she had asked and because it was owed, payment for the meal in the only currency that fit. The flat grassland that ran to the edge of the world. The sandstone country, the koppies, the grain silos standing up out of nothing like the towns had hung their whole hope on one tall thing. The dorps a hundred kilometres apart. The light, in the late afternoon, going gold across the veld the exact gold the rice had gone tonight — and he did not say that part, he only thought it.

"It sounds empty," she said.

"It looks empty. It isn't. Everything's just spread out and quiet about itself." He turned his glass the way Hakim had turned his. "Where I come from people stay too. Same reason. You don't leave the place your grandfather stayed in. The land remembers who didn't run."

The mother's word from the site came up in him — *we are not sad people, we are people with a great deal behind us* — and he understood, sitting on a roof in Mosul, that he could have said the same sentence about half the dorps between Bethlehem and Warden: the staying kind, the address-people, the ones the wars and the droughts and the leaving years had thinned and not emptied. He did not say it. The parallel was not his to draw out loud; it would have made their losing about his losing, and it was not. But he carried it down into himself and set it beside the okra and the laugh and the float rising in the dark.

There is a place I can't go back to, he did not say. The most beautiful thing I ever saw, and a man with a letter shut the gate. So I know a little about staying being the thing you don't get to choose. He kept it under, where it lived.

The explosion came then.

Distant — west, across the river, in the broken half — a flat hard cough of sound that arrived a half-beat after the small jump of light it threw against the underside of nothing. The boy, who had come up at some point and was sitting at his sister's feet, went rigid; his hand found her ankle. Jakobus felt his own body do the old thing for a quarter-second, the room narrowing, the cordite-ghost rising though there was no cordite, only the memory the body keeps. He breathed it through against the generator's drone, heart matched to the diesel, and it passed.

Nobody got up. Nobody ran. Hakim listened with his head tilted for two seconds — distance, direction, the arithmetic everyone here did without thinking — and then reached out and put his hand on his son's head, once, and said something low to him in Arabic that Jakobus did not need translated, and the boy's shoulders came down, and the talk resumed where it had broken off, almost exactly. The daughter poured more tea.

"Old ordnance," Hakim said to Jakobus, by way of nothing. "Or someone clearing it badly. It is far. It is always far, until the day it is not."

He shrugged, and the shrug was the whole city. "You learn to tell the far ones. The boy is still learning."

Later, when the tank had filled and the women had gone down and Hakim had gone down, Jakobus stayed up on the roof a while, alone with the generators and the close stars and the dark west where the lamassu had lived for three thousand years and did not anymore.

He thought about what he had come into this country to do, which was nothing, which was to look. To stand where the worst had been and see what was left, and carry the seeing out to people who would never get a permit to come. He had built a life out of getting people out of bad places, out of reading the ground for the exit; and there was no exit here that was his to find, and no one here he had been sent to save. Hakim was not waiting for him. The lamassu would be reassembled, if it was, by a man with a memory and a crew with no money and a custodian who could overrule a laser scan with his hands. Suad would carry the water until the float held — and now it would hold, and that, a float arm splinted with safety wire, was the entire and exact size of what he had to give. Not rescue. A tank that filled itself tonight. Presence. A wrench that met a need because the two facts wanted to meet.

It was less than he'd once have thought a man should be able to offer. It was, he had come slowly to understand, the only honest thing there was — to be in the room, and pay something on purpose, and not pretend the staying was yours.

The generator below caught a fresh rhythm as someone downstairs threw a switch, and his heart, unbidden, came down to find it. Far across the river the dark held its rubble and its night, and the city droned on in its low choir — a town of stubborn small fires keeping themselves alight — and somewhere Nadia's call was already shaping the road north for tomorrow, the next gate with no prize at the end of it.

He folded the shades out of his pocket, looked at them, and put them back. There was no one up here to be seen by but the stars, and the stars had never needed convincing.

Chapter 10 — Eastbound

Erbil airport had the particular cleanliness of a place built to reassure foreigners that the country around it was not the country it was. Cold marble, a coffee chain, a duty-free with watches no one in Mosul could buy in three lifetimes. Jakobus moved through it the way he moved through everything — soft-bellied and unhurried, a man you would forget you had seen.

The exit officer was young and bored and had a stamp he loved the sound of. Jakobus took the shades off before the man looked up, folded them, set them on the counter beside his passport, bare-eyed and patient. *Nothing here. Look as long as you like.* The officer looked. He looked at the heritage-survey letter, at the NGO credential that was real enough to survive a phone call, at the photograph and then at the face — longer than Jakobus would have wanted, the way men look when a name three desks back has whispered something.

It was nothing. It was almost certainly nothing. But the back of his neck had gone cool the way it did at borders, and he had learned forty years ago to trust the neck and not the head, so he stood very still and very plain and let the man find no reason. The stamp came down. The sound the officer loved happened. Jakobus picked the shades up, did not put them on, and said *shukran* in the flat Mosul Arabic he'd been wearing for a week — the swallowed consonants of it — and the officer's face eased the half-inch that meant *this one didn't learn us from a book*. That half-inch was worth more than the letter.

He kept the glasses in his hand all the way to the gate. The feeling of being watched did not leave with the stamp. It rode the escalator with him. *It is still there*, he thought — somewhere behind the marble,

a list with a line on it the war had ended and the line had not.

The plane was an old turboprop, the seats worn shiny by a thousand men in cheap suits. He had a window. Below, the land went brown, then ridged, then white-knuckled with mountains, and he watched Iraq slide off the wing and understood that he was leaving something unfinished — the only way this whole crescent let you leave anything.

He thought about the float arm on Hakim's roof, the cheap aluminium bent and splinted, the water holding now where it should. A small honest thing. He thought about the lamassu in pieces and the men deciding, gently, forever, whether to make it whole or let the wound stand as the truth of the wound. He thought about Nadia's voice on the phone last night — dry and tired and competent, arranging the next leg the way she arranged everything — and how he had not thanked her properly, because thanking her properly would have embarrassed them both.

None of it was his. That was the spine of the whole road. He came, he stood, he carried, he fixed the small thing nobody else had hands free for, and then he left, and the people who belonged to the stones kept the stones. *Because it isn't mine to say.* He had said it to himself so many times now it had worn smooth as the onyx in his pocket — and then he remembered he'd given the onyx away, a year ago and a continent south, and his hand checked anyway, the way a tongue checks the gap of a pulled tooth.

He did not sleep. He never did at altitude with strangers behind him; and the moon was nearly full — he'd checked, three days off — and on the full moon he did not sleep on the ground either. The wiring tightened. He let it. He set his breathing to a beat that wasn't playing and brought the pulse down anyway, by hand, the old trick, and watched the white teeth of the Hindu Kush come up to meet the wing.

Kabul came in a brown haze and a hard descent and a wall of sound the second the doors opened. Iraq had been heat and ruin and a kind of exhausted quiet under the violence. This was different. This was crowd. A thousand transactions happening at once in a language he

had only the desert-edge of — Dari coming at him from every side, Pashto under it, and his Arabic suddenly worth almost nothing, a coin from the wrong country.

He felt it land in his body before he named it: for the first time in weeks, he was a foreigner who could not eavesdrop. The reading went half-blind. He could still read a face, a hand, the weight a man put on his back foot — that was below language, that ported anywhere. But the words washed past him, and a man who navigates by what he overhears does not love going deaf.

A boy of maybe nineteen found him by the kit, not the face — the waistcoat, the boots, the dust-coloured nothing of him that read as *this one* to the right eye. He said the right name, Nadia's bridge into this country, and Jakobus answered with the counter-word and the boy's shoulders dropped an inch. Provisional, this one. A link, not a man you'd ever see twice. He moved fast, talked little, kept Jakobus's elbow in the crowd — not to steer him but to make them one shape instead of two, and that was good craft, that was a boy who'd done this before and would, if he was lucky, get old.

"You don't stay in Kabul," the boy said, in English worn thin and serviceable. "Farzana's man takes you west. He waits. We don't make him wait."

Jakobus did not make him wait.

The handoff happened in a car park that smelled of diesel and frying oil — fast, two sentences and a nod — and then the boy was gone back into the noise and Jakobus was folding into a Corolla older than him with a driver named *Wais*, which might have been true, who looked at him once, properly, ankles to eyes, then forward, and pulled into traffic without a word. Farzana's contact. The next hand on him. He had been passed down a chain of strangers since Amman, four hands deep now and going deeper — each one knowing only the hand before and the hand after, the whole thing built so no single link could give away the rope.

The road west out of Kabul was its own country.

Iraqi danger, he had come to know, was a thing of edges and lists — checkpoints with men who'd fought a war and remembered who,

ordnance asleep in fields, the violence concentrated and political and, mostly, behind you or ahead of you, rarely on the road itself in daylight. This was something else. The danger here was diffuse, ambient, baked into the ground like the dust. It was the road itself — the drop on the right with no rail and no apology, the trucks that owned the centre line as a birthright. It was the not-knowing who held the next bend. The checkpoints came without warning and without a uniform you could read, and that undid one of his oldest tools: he could not always tell the state from the not-state, the soldier from the man with a soldier's gun and his own ideas.

So he did the only thing that ported. At each one he took the glasses off before they were asked for, laid his hands open on his knees where they could be seen, let Wais do the talking in the language he didn't have, and gave the men at the window the bare eyes and a small slow nod that said *I am a guest in your country and I know it*. He did not smile too much — a man learns the calibration of a smile by getting it wrong in enough countries — and he did not reach for anything, ever, not even water, until a hand had waved that he could.

At the third checkpoint a man with a long beard and a newer rifle than the others leaned right into the window and looked at him for a long time, and Jakobus held the look without challenge and without flinch — the way you hold a dog's eye when running would be the worst thing you could do — and let the man arrive at his own conclusion. Wais said three sentences, soft, and one of them had Farzana's region in it, a name of a place, and the man straightened, waved them through with his chin, and went back to the truck behind. Jakobus breathed out through his nose and did not let his shoulders show it.

"You speak good," Wais said, eyes on the road, which was a strange thing to say to a man who had not spoken a word.

"I listen good," Jakobus said. "Mostly. Not here. Here I'm a deaf man at a party."

Wais's mouth moved, almost. "Better deaf than loud."

"Ja." He let that sit. "I'm learning your folds. I know the ones from home. Yours I'm still learning. You don't fake it. You ask."

The driver glanced at him then, one quick read, and seemed to file something, and the cab was easier after that — the way a room is

easier once two men have agreed, without saying it, that neither is the threat.

They climbed. The air thinned and the light went hard and clean the way it does at altitude, and the cold came up off the rock as the sun dropped behind a ridge, and Jakobus pushed his sleeves up rather than down — arms bare, as always, the banked warmth holding fine where Wais reached for a jacket, glanced at him, and said nothing, filed it under foreign-and-mad, which was the correct file.

He took stock, the way he made himself do at the seam between two legs of a road, before the fatigue lied to him about how much he had left. He ran the inventory by feel, without looking: the coffee, the grinder, the pot — kept, always, the one ceremony. The boots, his now, broken to him over a thousand miles, the realest thing he owned. The waistcoat lighter than it had been in Amman — he had left a folding saw with Hakim's son, a good clean machine in a boy's careful hands, and he did not miss it. The kit shedding itself, mile by mile, into the right palms. Less to carry. Less wall.

And the mind. He checked that too, honestly. It was tired in a way that was no longer the body's tired — the language-deafness, the new rules, the four strangers deep, the list behind him in the Erbil marble, the moon coming, the road with no rail. The fatigue of a man recalibrating an instrument that had served him forty years and now read half-wrong on strange ground. The competence was still there. It was just no longer *home* — and a man does not get to be at home everywhere; he had told himself that lie young, and the road had spent decades correcting it.

He let the deafness be a fact and not a wound. He would learn enough Dari to be polite and no more, because more would be a lie and a man who fakes the fold advertises before he opens his mouth. He would defer to Farzana the way he had deferred to Nadia and Hakim — let the valley people read the valley, let them say what the empty niches meant, because it was not his to say and never would be.

The Corolla took a switchback in the failing light, and somewhere ahead, hours yet, were the two great hollows in the cliff where the Buddhas had stood, and the people who lived under them still, and a woman he had not met who would tell him what it meant to live every

day in the shadow of an absence.

He did not put the glasses on. The light was nearly gone. There was no one left on the road to read, and for once he let his own eyes have the country bare.

“How far?” he asked.

“Far,” Wais said, and drove.

Chapter 11 — The Empty Niches

The road climbed all morning, and then the world opened, and Jakobus stopped trying to talk.

They came over a saddle of brown rock and the valley lay below them — green along its floor where the river ran, the willows and the wheat plots in their long strips, the brown-pink cliffs rising on the far side in a wall that went on for kilometres. He had seen photographs. Everyone had seen the photographs. The photographs did not have the weight in them, the way the cliff stood there in the cold clean light with the snow still on the peaks behind it, holding the whole bowl of the valley the way a hand holds water.

He found the niches before he meant to. The eye goes to them. That was the thing nobody warned you about — the eye goes straight to the two great hollows in the rock face, because the face is everywhere the same and there, twice, it is not. Two tall arched cavities, one larger, one smaller, scooped out of the cliff like doorways into nothing. The light fell into them and found no edge to land on.

He had spent twenty years learning to read what was in a place. He sat in the car and read what was not.

“Buddha,” Wais said, and lifted his chin at the cliff, and then, because that was all the English he had for it, said nothing else.

Farzana met them at the edge of the lower town, where the road gave up its tar to dust and the dust became a lane between mud-brick walls. She was younger than the voice on the phone had made her

— late twenties, a grey headscarf, a man's quilted jacket too big in the shoulders, a notebook held against her chest with both arms the way a student holds a book. Her father's house stood behind her, two younger brothers loitering at the gate to look at the foreigner. She shook Jakobus's hand once, firm and brief, and held his face for a half-second longer than courtesy strictly asked.

"You're the one who carries things," she said.

"When there are things to carry."

"There will be paperwork first." She said it flatly, the way you name weather. "The police want to see you. They saw the car come over the pass. Stay in the back. Let me."

He took the shades off before she finished the sentence — folded them, slid them into the chest pocket of the vest, gave her his bare eyes. She registered it, the way the careful ones did, a small recalibration behind her own. Then she turned and walked toward the low concrete building with the flag on it, and Jakobus followed three steps back and to the side, the way you walk when you are luggage, his hands hanging open and empty where they could be seen.

The post had two men in it, a wood stove, and a ledger gone soft at the corners. Farzana did the talking. He understood none of the words and all of the shape — the permit produced, the second permit they wanted that nobody had told her about, the older policeman tapping the page and looking at Jakobus and saying something that set her jaw. She did not raise her voice. She opened the notebook and showed them a list of names, and the names did the work; somebody in it was somebody's cousin, somebody had cleared this through somebody in the provincial office, and the foreigner was a guest of the valley and not the valley's problem. Jakobus watched the older man's shoulders come down a centimetre at a time. He had seen that exact descent in a hundred rooms and never once been able to do it with a word — only the slow patient currency of *known by the right people* could buy it, and it was hers to spend, not his.

He kept his eyes soft and on the middle distance and his mouth shut. There was a moment the man looked straight at him and said something with *farangi* in it, and the younger one laughed, and Jakobus let it go past him like the children's version of the word, the glad one, even though this was not the glad one. Not your room. Not your turn.

The shades stayed in his pocket and his face stayed open, and after a while the stamp came down on the page, hard, twice, and that was the gate.

Outside, Farzana exhaled through her nose. "They wanted forty dollars for a stamp that is free."

"Did they get it?"

"Twenty." She slid the notebook back against her chest. "I told them you were poor."

"I am poor," he said. "Just in a complicated currency." That earned him almost a smile, the corner of it, gone before it finished. She started up the lane and he fell in behind her again, and did not put the glasses on, because the sun was low and kind and there was, for once, nothing here he needed to hide his eyes from.

She took him to the cliff before she took him to the house. He understood that this was deliberate — that you met the absence first, in her telling, the way you met the police first; that there was an order to things in the valley and he was being walked through it.

Up close the niches were enormous past sense. He stood at the foot of the larger one with his neck bent back and could not hold the whole of it in his sight at once. The cavity went up and up, the carved folds where the robes had been still faintly there, ghost-pleats, the iron pins that had held the plaster of the face long gone to rust-stains. Scaffolding clung to one side, modern steel, somebody's careful slow work shoring up the empty walls so the empty would not collapse into nothing-at-all. The floor of the niche was scorched. He knew, without being told, what had scorched it. They had not just blown the statue down. They had burned what would burn and shelled what would not, over days, because a thing that had stood fifteen hundred years did not come down for a single charge, and the men who wanted it gone had been patient too, in their way.

"My father watched it," Farzana said. She was looking up, not at him. "From the roof. They told everyone to stay inside. He went up on the roof. He says the sound was not like a building falling. He says it was like the mountain coughing. For two days the mountain coughed, and

then there was the place where the Buddha had been, and the dust did not settle for a week. It got into the bread.”

Jakobus said nothing. He had a hundred things and not one of them was his to say. He put his hand flat against the cold rock at the base of the niche, where the carving still held the shape of a fold, and left it there. The stone took a little of his warmth and gave him back its own deep cold — the patience of a thing that had outlasted the men who carved it and the men who unmade it both.

“Tourists used to come and be sad about the statue,” Farzana said. “They would stand here and be very sad and take a photograph of the hole and feel the right feeling and go home.” She looked at him now. “Are you here to be sad about the statue?”

“No.”

“Good.” She turned and looked up into the empty arch again. “We had a famine here, in the destroying time. Two of my uncles. The world was very sad about the statue. The world did not send wheat.” She said it without heat, the way he himself said the worst things — flatter for the weight of them. “So when you are sad, be sad about a person. The statue was a person too, once. Somebody’s hands. But it is easier to be sad about a hole in a cliff than about a hole in a family, and the easy sad is no use to anyone.”

He took that and held it and did not answer, because she had not asked a question, and because she was right, and because anything he said would have been him stepping into a room that was hers. The ache was real in him — not for the statue, he found, but for the carvers, the ten thousand hands and the years and the certainty it must have taken to look at a blank cliff and decide to find a face in it; for the unrepeatable thing a people had once been sure enough of themselves to attempt. That ache he was allowed. He let it sit where it sat, under the sternum, the place the bass usually lived.

The light went off the snow above them and came down the cliff in a slow gold line, and the niches filled, for a moment, with the colour of nothing.

The house was warm. That was the first thing — after the cliff and its cold, the room behind the curtain was warm, a stove going, the family

already gathered, the women's quick courteous appraisal and retreat, the brothers grinning, an old man on the cushions at the head of the room who did not get up but lifted a hand.

They fed him. He had known they would; he had been counting on it the way he counted on it everywhere, the deepest *Sawubona* there was, the taking of what a house offered by the house's own hand. Rice with carrots and raisins gone gold in it, a flat bread torn and passed, a dish of beans, tea after with too much sugar in it the way the desert and the highland both took their tea. He ate what was put in front of him and ate it with his right hand the way the room did, clumsy at it and not pretending otherwise, and the old man watched him be clumsy and was pleased, the way hosts everywhere were pleased by a man who tried and lost a little and did not mind being seen to.

The old man talked. Farzana turned it into English for him in low quick passes, only the shape, leaving the music in Dari where it lived.

He talked about the valley. Not the statues — he came to those late and briefly and let them go quickly, the way you mention a death in the family to a stranger, once, and move on. He talked about the river and the wheat and the years the snow came wrong. He talked about the caves — Jakobus had not understood, until now, that the whole cliff behind the niches was honeycombed with them, hundreds of monks' cells and chapels cut into the rock, painted once, the oldest oil paintings in the world they had found up there, older than anything in Europe; and that in the bad years the families had lived in them, in the Buddha's own caves, sheltering inside the holy mountain because the holy mountain was the only roof that could not be taken. The old man laughed, telling it. A whole winter, he said, his family in a cave a Buddhist had carved with his own hands a thousand years before any of them were born, and the cave kept them warm, and what did it matter what a man had believed who had dug you a warm room out of a cliff. A good room is a good room. The dead carver had been a good neighbour.

Jakobus laughed too, low, at the right place. He did not have to perform it. It was the truest thing he had heard in a week — the valley had not lost its wonder and then mourned it; the valley had taken the wonder, when it was unmade, and *used* the bones of it to stay alive, had crawled inside the broken miracle and let it shelter them one more time. They had not been saved by anyone. They had

saved themselves in the ruins of a thing strangers came to weep over.

He had come a long way thinking he understood that loss was a deadline. Sitting on the cushions with the tea going cold and the old man's hands moving in the lamplight, he understood he had had it backwards. The loss was not the deadline. The loss was the floor they had built the next thing on.

"He wants to know," Farzana said, "why you came. Really. Not the survey." Her eyes were level. "He says you have the face of a man who has lost a country."

Jakobus turned the tea glass on the mat, a slow quarter-turn, and the room waited, and he was not going to lie to the old man, and he was not going to give him the whole of it either, because the whole of it was a wound and a guest does not bleed in another man's warm room.

"Tell him," he said, "that there is a place I love that I can't go to anymore. And that I came here to learn how a man lives next to a thing he loved and lost, without it making him hard." He looked up at the old man, bare-eyed. "Tell him I think I came to the right valley."

Farzana said it in Dari. The old man listened, and nodded, slowly, and said something short, and did not smile, and reached out and put his hand on Jakobus's forearm — over the open shirt, over the bare skin, over the Arabic the old man could not read and did not ask about — and left it there a moment, the warmth of one old man's hand on the arm of another, and then took it back.

"He says," Farzana said, and stopped, and started again. "He says: you don't. It makes you hard. And then you have children, and they make you soft again, and that is how it is carried." She looked away, at the curtain over the door, at the cold valley behind it. "He says you should have children."

Jakobus drank the last of the cold sweet tea and set the glass down empty, the way you do when you mean to be poured another, and did not answer that one, because there was no answer the room could hold, and because somewhere south of all of it there was a son who would not phone, alive to not phone, and the old man's medicine was the one cure he had already failed to take.

Outside, in the dark, the empty niches stood in the cliff he could no

longer see, holding their nothing patiently, waiting for the morning to fill them again with light and then let it go.

Chapter 12 — Valley of Survivors

The water wheel was making a sound it should not make.

Jakobus heard it before he saw it — a dry, intermittent knock, wood on wood with no water between — the kind of sound that, anywhere on earth, in any tongue, means *something here has stopped doing what it was built to do*. He had been walking the field-edge with Farzana since the morning bread, learning the valley the only way he ever learned anything, which was with his feet. She had stopped talking about the niches. He was glad of it. The niches were behind them now, up the cliff, patient as ever, and down here it was potatoes and lucerne and a low stone channel running grey glacier-water between the plots, and the wheel beside the channel turning when it felt like it.

“It catches,” Farzana said, following his look. “Two seasons now. Karim keeps saying he will fix it.”

“Where’s Karim?”

“Kabul. Like everyone.”

Jakobus crouched at the channel and laid his hand flat in the water and took it out fast — cold the way only mountain melt is cold, the cold that bites a knuckle. He watched the wheel go round, knock, hesitate, drag, go round. He did not need the language for this. The paddle was split where the axle gudgeon had worn its bearing oval, so the whole wheel sat a thumb-width off true and dropped its weight onto one tired board every revolution. Somewhere in his life he had wrapped a Cruiser’s steering wheel because the leather came off and

he would not replace what he could repair. The wheel told him the same thing the steering wheel had: *I am not broken. I am asking.*

“May I look at it,” he said. Not *can I fix it*. He had learned that, finally, somewhere between Mosul and here. You ask to look. You do not announce a rescue.

Farzana called something across the field, fast, to two boys who had been pretending not to watch the foreigner since he came over the rise. They came at once, the way boys come to a thing that might be entertaining, and squatted on the channel-edge beside him, close enough that he could smell woodsmoke in their clothes and the dust of the field, and they watched his hands with the frank, merciless attention of children everywhere.

The taller one said something. Farzana didn’t translate. The shorter one laughed.

“What,” Jakobus said.

“He says your hands are too clean to be a workman’s hands.”

He looked at his hands. The nails were clipped square and clean — they were always clean; that was his mother forty years gone and still holding the line — and the boy was right, and there was no answer to it that wasn’t a lie, so he gave none. He held the back of one hand up for inspection, turned it, and the boys leaned in and laughed harder, delighted, *the soft foreign man with the lady’s nails*. He let them have it. It cost nothing and it bought everything.

He took the folding Japanese pull-saw out of the waistcoat — one of the few things still in there; the pockets ran emptier these days than they used to, a thing he noticed without examining — and opened it, and the taller boy went quiet at the teeth of it, the way a person goes quiet at a tool that is honestly itself. Jakobus shaved the split paddle clean, fair and square, took the burr off, and sat back on his heels, because the real problem was the bearing, and the bearing wanted a shim, and a shim wanted something hard and thin and willing.

He went into the waistcoat again. The boys craned. He came out with a coin — an old SA five-cent, copper gone the colour of dried blood, the kind no one on earth bends to pick up — and held it edge-on to the worn gudgeon, and the boys looked at the coin and looked at

him and the shorter one said something scornful and the taller one elbowed him.

"He says that is not money," Farzana said.

"He's right," said Jakobus. "It's a shim."

He folded the coin into the gap, worked the axle back to true with the heel of his hand, felt the wheel come up off the tired board and float on its own weight, and stood, and they all looked at it. It turned. Knock-knock-drag was just *turn* now, smooth, the channel-water climbing the paddles and tipping bright into the upper race and away down the field-line to the potatoes.

Nobody clapped. He was glad of that too. The taller boy put his own hand in the water and took it out fast — cold — and grinned at Jakobus, *we did this, you and I*, though Jakobus had done all of it, and that was the right way for it to read, so he let it read that way. He clapped the boy once on the shoulder, the flat of his hand, no weight in it, and the boy puffed up like a man.

"You used your money," Farzana said. She had come to stand at his shoulder, watching the coin where it sat sunk in the gudgeon, doing the one job nothing else to hand could do.

"It wasn't doing anything in my pocket."

"You will want it back."

"No." He looked at the wheel. "It found work. Leave it."

She took him to the school after the sun was high.

It was a low building of mud-brick and tin, set where the valley opened, put up — Farzana said, dry, not asking him to be sad about it — on the rubble of an older building that had been put up on older rubble still. From the doorway you could see the cliff. You could see the niches. The children learned arithmetic with the empty places where the statues had stood framed in the window above the teacher's head, and nobody in the room looked at them, because you do not spend your day looking at the hole in your own street.

Jakobus took his shades off at the door. There was no uniform here, no boom, no man to be made to feel seen — but a teacher is a kind

of authority, the oldest kind, and he gave the room his bare eyes the way he gave them to a customs officer, and for the same reason: *I have nothing here you need to search for.*

The teacher was a woman of maybe fifty, in grey, chalk on the side of one hand, reading glasses pushed up into her hair. She looked at him a long moment without warmth and without hostility, the look of someone taking the measure of a thing that has walked into her room, and then she said something to Farzana and went on with the lesson. The children chanted a thing back at her, all together, the way children do, and a small girl in the front row turned around in her seat to stare at Jakobus with her thumb in her mouth until the teacher said one word and she turned back.

He stood at the wall. He did not take a photograph. The camera was deep in the kit and it stayed there; he had stopped reaching for it somewhere around Mosul too, when Hakim had said nothing about the not-taking and Jakobus had understood that the not-taking *was* the thing he had to give.

When the lesson broke the teacher came to him. Farzana stood between, easy now, the translation running both ways without anyone marking it as translation.

“She asks why you have come to see children doing sums,” Farzana said. “She says people come to see the cliff. They do not come to see the school.”

“Tell her the cliff doesn’t do sums.”

Farzana said it. The teacher’s mouth moved — not a smile, but the place a smile starts from. She said something longer.

“She says: you want to know how it is to teach where the loss does not stop. You have that on your face. Everyone has that question on their face when they come. She is tired of the question.” Farzana paused, listening. “She says she will answer it once, for you, because you fixed the wheel and her sister farms that field.”

Jakobus said nothing. He had learned that too — that the silence after a hard sentence is a place you leave open, not a place you fill.

The teacher talked for a while. Farzana let it run and then gave it to him in pieces, plain, not smoothing it.

“She says the loss is not the thing. The loss is the weather. You do not teach *despite* the weather, you teach *in* it, the way her sister farms in it — you put the seed in because spring came, not because spring is safe.” Farzana listened. “She says the children do not know there was a statue. To them there is only the shape of the empty place, and they were born under it, so to them it is not empty. It is just the cliff. The grief is hers. She does not give it to them. That is the whole job — to teach them in the weather and keep the weather off them. She says she will be dead and these will be old and *their* children will think the cliff was always two doorways into nothing, and that—” Farzana stopped, then went on, careful with it. “She says that is not defeat. That is how a wound becomes a place.”

Jakobus looked at the niches through the window above her head.

He thought of a man telling a boy, decades ago, that pressure makes a crystal — and meaning it, and being a monster while he meant it, both at once. He thought of the wheel turning on a coin. He thought, briefly and without permission, of a phone that did not ring, of a son who had been born under the shape of an absent father and grown up thinking that was just the cliff. He had given the boy weather and kept none of it off him. He had not known how. He looked at the teacher with the chalk on her hand and understood that she knew a thing he had failed to learn, and that she was teaching it to thirty children a day, in the weather, and that this was not a small thing she did. It was the whole thing. It was the only thing anyone had ever done that lasted.

He did not say any of that. You do not lay your wreck on a working woman’s floor.

“Tell her,” he said, “that where I come from we say a person is only a person through other people.” He stopped. It wasn’t quite right for here; the words were his oma’s and they belonged to another country’s red ground. But the teacher was watching his face and not waiting for Farzana, reading him the way Farzana read him, the way the wheel had read him, and he finished it anyway. “Tell her she’s the other people. For all of them. That’s the job.”

Farzana said it. The teacher took her reading glasses down out of her hair and held them in her hand and looked at them, and then she looked at Jakobus, and the thing that had been starting in her mouth

arrived.

She said one more thing, short.

“She says you will take tea,” Farzana said. “It was not a question.”

The tea was green and came in a battered pot, and they drank it standing in the schoolyard while the children ate bread out of cloths, and the teacher told Farzana a story about a goat that Farzana refused to translate because, she said, it was filthy, and Jakobus laughed anyway because the teacher's face told the whole thing without a word of it. He felt the outsider in himself the entire time — the *farangi*, the soft pale man with the clean nails who did not have the tongue and never would, who would walk out of this valley in a few days and leave them in their weather — and he held that feeling where he could see it and did not try to make it go away. It was honest. It belonged here more than any sympathy would have.

But they had handed him the cup. That was the thing. Out of all of it, that.

He drank it down, the cheap green tea, and it was good, and he would have drunk it from a dog's bowl and called it good, because the cup was the door and they had opened it and he had walked through.

The market in the late afternoon was a dozen stalls along the road, and the fruit man saw him coming from forty metres and got the price ready in his eyes.

Jakobus knew exactly what was happening. He let it happen. He stood at the stall and put his clean hand on a heap of small bruised mountain apples and asked the price in the four words of Dari he had — Farzana had drifted off to talk to a woman with a baby, and he was, for the first time all day, on his own legs in this country — and the fruit man told him a number that was three times the number, and held him steady, *what are you going to do about it, farangi*.

Jakobus paid it. He counted out the notes slow, the way a man does who has just been told an honest price, and the fruit man's face did a small complicated thing — the small shame of a man who has overcharged someone who let him without a fight, which is worse, some-

how, than the fight — and then he put two extra apples in the bag and would not be looked at while he did it.

Jakobus took the bag. He took one apple out and split it with his thumb and his thumbnail, clean, the way he split everything, and handed half across the stall, and the fruit man took it because there is no language on earth in which you refuse half a man's apple, and they stood there eating, the cheat and the cheated, in the long gold light with the cliff above them holding its two empty doorways open to the sky.

"You paid too much," Farzana said, coming back. She had the look of someone who had watched the end of it.

"Ja." Jakobus ate his half of the apple. It was sour and small and exactly right. "But now he owes me a good price next time."

"There is no next time. You leave in three days."

He looked up at the niches, going copper now in the late sun, patient, lived-under, not empty to anyone born here. Somewhere down the field the wheel was turning on a coin that no one would ever bend to pick up, lifting cold water to the potatoes, and a teacher was walking home in the weather to do it all again tomorrow, and a boy was telling his brother that *he* had fixed the wheel, with the foreigner, the one with the lady's hands.

"Then he owes someone," Jakobus said. "It comes round."

He did not say the other thing — that he was, for the first time since Africa, somewhere he might be sorry to leave. He put another apple in his pocket against the morning. There was work in the valley if a man kept his eyes down and his hands offered, and three days was not long, and the wheel would want checking after a week, and he would not be here to check it.

He held that, the way he held all of it, and said nothing, and followed Farzana home.

Chapter 13 — Stories by Lamplight

The lamp was a tin thing with a glass funnel, the wick trimmed low so the oil would last the evening, and it threw a circle of yellow over the floor cloth and not much past it. Beyond the circle the room went to brown and then to dark. Jakobus sat where Farzana had put him, against the wall, his back to the cold of it, and let the room fill up around him.

They came in twos and threes. An uncle with a stick and a face like a dried apricot. Two women who settled at the far edge of the lamp with a baby passed between them. A boy of maybe nine who stared at Jakobus's boots until he was hauled by his collar to sit beside the uncle. A neighbour in a brown waistcoat over a grey shalwar took Jakobus's offered hand in both of his and held it a moment longer than a greeting needed, weighing it, the way you weigh a thing you've heard about but not yet held.

The food came on one big platter and several small ones: rice gone gold with oil and studded with raisins and shreds of carrot, flat bread torn and stacked, a bowl of yoghurt thin enough to drink, a dish of beans cooked soft. Farzana put a torn round of bread in his hand without ceremony. "Eat. You're a guest. If you don't eat they'll think I starved you on the road, and they'll never let me hear the end of it."

He ate. He used his right hand the way the room used it, three fingers and a thumb, the bread for a tool where there wasn't one, and he did not wave anything away or ask what was in it, because that was the deepest courtesy he owned and the cheapest, and because he was hungry. The beans were good. He said so, in the three words of Dari

he'd let Farzana drill into him on the road, and the women at the edge of the lamp laughed — not at the words, he thought, but at the trouble he'd taken with them — and the uncle said something that pulled a louder laugh out of the rest.

Farzana translated around a mouthful. "He says your accent is terrible and your manners are very good. He says that is the right way round for a foreigner."

"Tell him I'll work on the manners and leave the accent," Jakobus said, and the uncle, when it reached him, showed two teeth and a great deal of gum and was pleased.

It went easily after that. They asked him things through Farzana — where he'd come from, whether his country had mountains, whether it had snow — and he answered short and true, and let the funny answers be funny and the others stand undressed. He had eaten in a hundred rooms like this one, on three continents, and the grammar was the same everywhere: you came in light, you ate what was put down, you laughed where laughing was offered, and you waited, hands clean and mouth mostly shut, to be allowed past the first room into the second.

The second room opened when the uncle began to talk about the Buddhas.

He didn't announce it. He was scolding the boy for reaching across the platter, and it slid sideways into memory the way old men's talk does, and Farzana went quiet to listen and then murmured it across low under the old man's voice. The uncle had been a young man when they stood. You could see them from his father's land, the two of them, the big one and the small one, cut into the cliff like they'd grown there. In the evening the light came off the rock and the big one held it longest, after the valley floor had already gone to shadow. His mother used to say you could tell the time of year by where the gold sat on the big one's shoulder. The niches now held the cold the way a tooth socket holds the ache after the tooth is gone — you stopped seeing the tooth and you never stopped feeling where it had been.

Farzana said the last part flat, getting it across, not performing it, and Jakobus kept his eyes on the lamp and his face still and did not nod the way a tourist nods to show he is moved, because the room was

not telling him this to move him. It was telling him because he was in the room.

The neighbour in the brown waistcoat said something then, sharper, and a couple of the others made low noises of agreement. Farzana's mouth tightened. "He says — he is saying the year they came down. He remembers the dust. For two days there was dust in the valley and no one knew, at first, what had broken, only that something the size of a mountain had broken. When the dust cleared they all came out and stood in the road and looked, and nobody spoke. He says that was the loudest the valley has ever been — all of them standing in the road, saying nothing."

The baby fussed and was hushed. The lamp guttered and steadied.

Jakobus had nothing to say to that and knew better than to find something. He had learned, a long time ago, that the worst thing you could do to a man's grief was hand him a sentence about it. So he sat in the silence with them, took it on the chest the way the room took it, and after a while the uncle reached over and tapped him on the knee, twice — *you're still here, good* — and started talking about the rebuilt water channel below the school instead, and the room came back up the way a held breath comes back up.

It was Farzana who turned it on him. She'd been watching him through the whole of it; she always was, that was her job and her nature both. When there was a lull she said it in English, just to him, though the room could hear the shape of it without the words:

"What is it like? To see this." She moved her chin at the dark where the cliff was, out past the wall. "Not your loss. Not your people. To come and look at someone else's hole in the ground."

The room had gone still to listen. They couldn't follow the English but they knew a real question when one was asked, and they wanted his answer the way you want to see whether a man flinches.

He thought about it. Not for effect — he'd have given a fast answer if he'd had one, and the not-having was the truth of it.

"It doesn't heal," he said. "That's the thing nobody tells you when you're young. You wait for it to close up and scar over and stop, the way they tell you it will. And it doesn't. You just get the valley back around it." He nodded at the wall, at the uncle. "He said it right. The

socket where the tooth was. You stop seeing the tooth. You never once stop feeling where it was.”

Farzana put it across slow, getting it right. The uncle listened with his head down. When she finished he didn’t laugh and he didn’t nod. He looked at Jakobus a long second, and then he said one word, and Farzana didn’t translate it because she didn’t have to — the old man had laid his dry hand flat against his own chest, over the heart, and held it there, and the word was the gesture, and the gesture said yes, *that, exactly that, you know it*. And Jakobus, who had spent forty years making sure no one in a room ever saw all the way down, found he had been seen down to something true by a man whose language he could not speak, and he sat with it, and did not look away.

“He says,” Farzana said, after, very quiet, “that he wondered if you would say the comforting thing. The thing the visitors say. About how it will be rebuilt and the world will not forget.”

“And?”

“And you didn’t. He says now he believes you have your own hole somewhere.”

“Tell him he reads people well,” Jakobus said. “Tell him I do.”

The neighbour cleared his throat, and what he said pulled the easy warmth out of the room a degree, and the men leaned in. Farzana listened, and her face did the thing it did when news was bad and practical at once. “There’s a place,” she said. “Three valleys west. A small place, you would not have heard of it — a hillside with old caves, painted, very old, Buddhist, before all this. Nobody much knew of it, which is the only reason it lasted.” She paused, listening to the rest. “Men have come. Not soldiers — men with a truck and tools. They are cutting the paintings out of the rock, in pieces, to sell. The people there sent word to ask if anyone in Bamiyan knows a foreigner, a museum man, anyone who can make a noise about it before there is nothing left to make a noise about.”

The room watched Jakobus while she said it. He understood the watching. He understood, too, exactly what he was and was not — a man with a borrowed permit and a closed border behind him and no museum and no army and no standing here at all — and that the cruellest thing he could do was let his face promise something his

hands could not pay.

"I'm not a museum man," he said. Plain. He let it land. "But I know people who carry weight where it counts. I can get word to the right desk. It won't be fast and it might not be enough. I won't tell you it will."

Farzana translated. The neighbour nodded slowly — not disappointed, Jakobus saw; the opposite. The honesty was worth more to him than a promise would have been. He'd heard promises. He said something short, and Farzana's mouth tugged. "He says he is glad you didn't tell him it would be enough. He says the ones who tell him it will be enough are the ones who do nothing."

"He reads people well too," Jakobus said.

The uncle wanted a story then. He'd had enough of the heavy talk and he wanted the foreigner to pay his way in the only currency this room ran on, which was a telling. He said it half as a demand, knocking his stick once on the floor, and the boy beside him sat up.

So Jakobus told them about the boots.

He told it slow, so Farzana could keep up, and plain, the way the room told things. He told them about the high flat grass country where he came from, where there were no mountains worth the name, just sandstone koppies the colour of these cliffs in the evening — which made the women murmur. He told them about a kind of boot a man could buy there, made the old way, heavy as armour, hell to break in — months of it, blisters, the leather fighting the foot the whole way — but once it was yours it was *yours*, fitted to your own crooked foot and no one else's. You didn't throw it out when the sole wore through. You sent it back. They put a new sole on the old boot, again and again, because the part that took the years to become yours was the upper, the part shaped to you, and that you kept.

"I gave a pair away once," he said. "On a road far from here. To a man who had bad shoes and the same wrong-shaped feet I have, who needed them more, daily, than I did." He paused. "It was the most comfortable thing I owned. Months in the making. And I'm not going to sit here and tell you I handed it over like a holy man. I bitched about it for a thousand kilometres. New boots on old feet. Blisters to the next country."

The room laughed when Farzana got it across — properly, the women and all — and the uncle slapped his knee, because that was the part that made it true, the bitching, the man who gave the thing away *and* complained, and they knew the difference between a saint in a story and a person in a room.

“But here’s the thing about a thing you love,” he said, and the laugh settled, and he found the lamp again with his eyes. “You resole it. You don’t replace it. Whatever it costs to keep, you keep paying, because the day you stop paying is the day it’s gone, and you don’t get it back. You get a new one, and a new one isn’t the same — the new one doesn’t know your foot.” He let that sit. “That’s what keeping a thing actually is. Not the day you buy it. All the days after, when you choose, again, to do the harder thing and keep it.”

He didn’t look at the wall when he said it. He didn’t need to. The uncle did, though — turned his head toward the dark where the cliff stood, the empty niches in it, and looked at it a while, and then looked back at Jakobus and nodded once, slow, the way you nod when someone has said your own thing back to you in their own words and got it right.

Farzana didn’t translate that nod. There wasn’t anything to translate.

He couldn’t sleep. He’d known he wouldn’t — the moon was three days off full and the wire in him had been tightening since dusk — so when the house had gone to its breathing he got up off the floor mat, found his boots by feel, the resoled pair, the ones that knew his foot, and went out under the cold to walk it off.

The valley was all silver and black. The river was a low sound somewhere below. The cliff stood across from him, the great wall of it pale under the moon, and the two niches in it — the big one and the small one — were two doors of pure shadow, blacker than the rock, blacker than the sky.

He stood in the cold field with his bare arms and looked at them.

There was a thing he had no word for, and he didn’t reach for one. The niches were empty and they were not empty. The shape was still there — cut, deliberate, a hollow the exact size and posture of the thing that had stood in it — so that the absence held the form the

way the socket held the tooth, the way a chair pulled out from a table still seats the person who has left the room. You could not look at the empty niche and not see the Buddha. The not-seeing was the seeing. They had broken the statue and made a more permanent one out of the breaking, a Buddha of pure missing, and it would stand in that cliff longer than the stone one had, because nothing could fall off it now.

Presence and absence, in the one shape, holding each other up.

He thought of the old man's hand flat on his own chest. He thought of his son, who would not call, who was alive to not call, and of the hole that shape made in him — its own niche cut clean and exact in the rock of him, which he had stopped seeing and never once stopped feeling. He thought, *I came to witness this. I didn't think it would witness me back.*

The cold should have had him by now. It didn't. He stood in it bare-armed, banked, the warmth coming up from somewhere it had been taught to come from, and watched the gold the old man had described — the moon's gold now, not the sun's — sit a moment on the shoulder of a Buddha that was not there, and then move on, the way light does, the way it always had, for as long as there had been a cliff and someone standing in the cold to see it.

He'd send word about the painted caves first thing. The neighbour's face was already filed in him under the things he would not be allowed to forget. Three valleys west. Men with a truck and tools. Not fast, and maybe not enough.

He went on standing there a while longer anyway, in the field, in the cold, where the gold had been.

Chapter 14 — Departure

The Beast was not here, and that was the worst of leaving Bamiyan.

Jakobus packed by the grey light before sunrise, the way he had packed a thousand times — bag rolled, vest settled on his shoulders over the open shirt, the cold finding his bare arms and finding nothing to do with him. He did not fight it. He stood in the courtyard and let the morning lie cold against his skin, watched the sky go from no-colour to the colour of weak tea over the eastern wall, and the niches in the cliff opposite came up out of the dark the way they always did — the shapes of where two giants had been.

He had slept perhaps two hours. The moon was three days off full. He had known he would not sleep, and he had not, and he had spent the dark hours against the wall with his coffee pot and the small burner, making the one decent thing a man makes for himself before a long road, because the difference between a hard week and an unbearable one was whether you could do that.

The household woke around him the way a household does — a child's cough, a door, the slap of dough. Farzana came out wrapped against the cold, her face still soft with sleep, and looked a moment at the bag by his feet.

"You will eat first." It was not a question. In her family nothing about eating was ever a question.

So he ate. Bread torn warm off the tray, the last of the curd, tea poured high and sweet, and he ate all of it because it was put in front of him by their hands and a man does not get up from another man's table because his own feet are itching. The uncle came and sat without a word and watched him eat with the satisfaction of an

old man watching a thing done right. The boy with the cough sat too, close, leaning, the way children lean when they have decided about you.

When it was done there was the gift.

The mother brought it folded in a cloth and put it in his hands without ceremony and stepped back, and Farzana said the words for it because the mother would not. Flatbread, three days' worth, the kind that keeps. And on top of the bread, folded small, a scarf — undyed wool, the natural brown-grey of the sheep it came off, the weave close and a little uneven, made on a frame in this house in some long winter by hands he would never know.

"For the cold on the road," Farzana said. "She says you go with your arms out like a fool and she will not have it on her conscience."

He laughed — properly, from the belly — and the mother allowed herself the smallest tightening at the corner of her mouth, which was, in her, an enormous thing. He held the scarf a moment. It smelled of woodsmoke and lanolin and the inside of a house that had taken him in. He wound it once around his neck, the wrong way, badly, on purpose, so the old woman could click her tongue and step in and fix it with two hard tugs and the flat of her palm against his chest, and then it was right, and she had touched him, and that was the whole conversation neither of them could have in the other's tongue.

"Tell her," he said to Farzana, and then could not find the end of the sentence, and said it instead in Dari, the three words he had, plainly, badly. *Tashakor. Bisyar tashakor.* Thank you. Thank you very much. The accent was wrong and the grammar was a child's and it landed better for it, the way it always did — not the polished thing learned from a book, the rough thing reached for with both hands.

The boy was watching him pack the bread away. Six, perhaps seven, the cough loose in his chest, the eyes enormous and following Jakobus's hands the way Jakobus had once followed his own father's hands.

He crouched. His knees told him about the cold and the two hours' sleep and the fifty-seven years, and he ignored them. He put his hand into the vest, into the one pocket where the stones lived, and felt past the worn smoothness of them — the river pebbles, the boyhood

quartz, the small ones picked up off a verge two countries ago — until his fingers found the one he had been keeping. Pink granite, water-rounded, a fleck of mica in it that caught the new light when he turned it. He had carried it out of the Free State as a boy. He had carried it a very long way.

He held it out flat on his palm.

The boy looked at it, then at Jakobus, asking with his whole face whether it was allowed.

“For you,” Jakobus said. Farzana gave him the Dari and he said that too, after her, getting it almost right.

The boy took it the way children take a true thing — both hands, suddenly serious, turning it to find the mica again. He had it. It was gone.

Something went out of Jakobus when the stone left his palm, and he let it go and kept it off his face, and only Farzana saw the half-beat his hand stayed open after it was empty. She did not say anything. There was nothing to say about it that would not make it smaller. A gift only counted if it cost the giver, and that one had cost, the small private way that mattered, and the cost was the whole of what he could give the boy that the boy might keep — a thing a man had carried across half the earth and then handed to a child in a valley nobody would ever sell a ticket to.

He stood. His knees again. He didn’t argue with them either.

There was a vehicle — a borrowed pickup, Toyota of course, a 4Y wheezing where a man would have wanted a diesel, the seats split and re-taped, a man called Wahid behind the wheel who was Farzana’s cousin’s husband and owed her something or was owed by her, the economy of the valley running on the same fuel as Jakobus’s whole life. Farzana was coming as far as the district edge. Past that he was on his own permits, his own face, the road.

He went to the open courtyard gate before he got in. The light was full on the cliff now, the long horizontal light that found every fold and shadow in the rock, and the two niches stood empty in it the way they would stand empty after he was dead and after Wahid was dead and after the boy with the stone was an old man telling his grandchildren about the foreigner with the bare arms. The carved arch above each

space. The stub of stone where a foot had been. The dark of the caves to either side where the monks had painted, a thousand years before anyone here was anyone's grandfather, and where, in a valley over, men with trucks were cutting the paintings off the rock right now while he stood here looking at nothing.

He looked at the nothing a long time. He had learned, last night, not to call it nothing.

Farzana came and stood beside him. She did not look at the niches; she had stopped needing to look at them years ago, the way you stop looking at a scar.

"What survives," she said, half to him, picking up the thread of the meal two nights back, "is not the statue. The statue did not survive. We survive. The looking survives." She nodded at the rock. "You will go and you will tell people you stood here, and that is one more person who knows there was something to stand in front of. That is the survival. It is small. It is what there is."

"It's not nothing," he said.

"No. It is not nothing." She almost smiled. "You learn."

He got in the pickup. The bread and the scarf went on the seat between them, and Farzana put her hand on the bread once, flat, as if blessing it or just checking it was real, and Wahid let the clutch out and the valley began to move past the cracked window.

The checkpoint was where the district road met the through-road, where it always was — a pole across two oil drums, a shipping container gone the colour of the dirt, four men with the bored attention of men who had stood here a thousand mornings. Jakobus took the shades off before the truck had stopped. He folded them into the breast pocket of the vest and let his eyes — pale this morning, the wrong-colour pale of too little sleep and too much leaving — be the first thing the man at the window saw.

The man was young. They were always young. He looked at the foreigner's papers and the permit with the right stamps and the letterhead that meant something in an office far from here and meant nothing on this dirt, and he looked at the foreigner's face, the soft belly,

the bare arms in the cold, the scarf wound wrong-then-right, and his thumb moved on the edge of a folded paper in his other hand. A list. There was always a list. Somewhere on it, maybe, a name; maybe not his name, maybe a man he had been once, four passports ago.

The young man's eyes went flat the way eyes go flat just before they decide to make a morning longer than it needs to be.

Farzana leaned across.

She did not raise her voice. She said the man's father's name, and then his uncle's, and then three sentences in Dari too fast and too local for Jakobus to follow more than the shape of, and the shape of them was: *this is the foreigner who fixed the wheel at the school; this is the man my family fed; you know my family; you know me.* She did not threaten. She did not produce money. She produced herself — her name, her face, her standing in a valley the young man's whole world fit inside — and laid it on the drum between them, and it was worth more than the letterhead and more than a bribe because it could not be revoked tomorrow.

The young man looked at her. Looked at the foreigner with the bare eyes who had not said a word and was not going to. Folded the list back into his pocket without looking at it again.

The pole went up.

It was Farzana's morning that had done it, not his. He had only taken his glasses off and kept his mouth shut and let the woman whose ground this was do the thing she could do that he never could. He filed it where he filed all of them — the debt, the favour, the life that ran on lives — and said nothing, because to thank her out loud at the window would have been to make her smaller in front of the boy in the borrowed vest, and she had spent enough of herself already.

She got out at the through-road. There was no ceremony to it. She stood by the cracked window a second, the wind off the high valley pulling at her scarf.

"Send your word," she said. "About the caves. Send it and do not lie to anyone about what it will do."

"I won't lie."

"I know." She stepped back. "*Sawubona*," she said, and it was so

wrong in her mouth, so completely unowned, a sound she had heard him use once at the meal and kept, that it stopped his breath. She had no idea what it meant. She had reached for the foreigner's own strange word the way he reached for theirs, badly, to honour him in the only currency he'd shown her — and that was the whole of it, that was *Ngikhona*, the answer come from a tongue that did not have the answer.

"Ngikhona," he said, very quietly, so she would not ask. And the pickup pulled out onto the long road, and she stood smaller and smaller in the wing mirror until the dust took her.

The road ran down out of the high valley and the cliffs went behind a shoulder of mountain and then they were gone, and there was only the brown country and the cold light and Wahid's bad clutch and the bread and the scarf on the seat.

He wound the scarf properly now. It was a good scarf. He would keep it.

He thought, as the kilometres came on, about all the places he could not fix. The caves in the next valley with the paintings coming off the rock under a hammer right now, and his word that would go out to two men he knew and a number that might still work, and the honest arithmetic of it: probably nothing. Probably the paintings were already in a crate. He would send the word anyway, because sending it cost him a small thing and not sending it would have cost him a larger one, and a man kept the small promises like a religion.

That was the trade. That was the whole of what he had. He could not put the Buddhas back in the rock. He could not stand in the next valley with a gun he did not carry and a body that was fifty-seven and stop trucks that the whole machinery of the broken world had failed to stop. He had handed a boy a stone and eaten a woman's bread and let another woman's name carry him through a gate, and he had stood in front of two empty niches long enough to be one more man who knew there had been something there.

He had promised the niches nothing, because there was nothing he could promise them, and to promise would have been the worst lie of all — the brochure lie, the package-tour lie, the necklace bought

at the gate that says *I was changed*. He would not wear that. He had never worn it.

He would carry the seeing. That much he could do. That much a man could actually do — see the thing honestly, all of it, the loss and the people still living in the loss and the boy with the stone, and carry it out past the checkpoints to people who would never come here, and set it down whole, the way you set a heavy thing down soft so you do not crack the floor.

It was small. It was what there was.

He reached into the vest and his fingers found the stones that were left — the boyhood quartz, the river pebbles, the small one from the verge two countries back — and the gap where the pink granite had been, a smoothness against his fingers that had not been there before, the new shape of his own pocket. He left his hand there a moment. Then he took it out, and put the shades back on against the climbing sun, and they drove east into the broken country, toward the next thing he could not fix.

Chapter 15 — The Next Gate

The road out of Afghanistan was not one road but a great many, none of them his, each handed to him by a man he would not see again.

He did not remember the third country with any clarity, and that was the point of it. A transit lounge that could have been anywhere, polished and cold, selling the same four perfumes. A taxi that smelled of pine air-freshener and old cigarettes. A hotel where the towels were too thin and the call to prayer came through a window that would not quite close. He slept four hours of the eight he had, and lay awake the rest with the curtain open a finger's width, watching the sodium light on a wall across the street, the bass of someone's television coming up through the floor in a frequency he could feel better than hear. He let his pulse find it and slow. By the time he moved on he had become, again, a man with no story worth telling — a brown jacket, a tired face, papers that said one thing and a body that said another.

Omar's voice had reached him once, on a borrowed phone in the polished lounge, flat with the particular calm of a man who had spent his life being calm at people for money. *You'll be met*, Omar had said. *His name is Yusuf. He has the south road. Don't argue the price; it's already fair, and he'll know if you don't know that.* Then the line had gone, the way Omar's lines always went — not hung up, just released, like a hand letting go of a rope it had finished pulling.

Yusuf met him at the edge of a town whose name Jakobus filed and did not say aloud. A man perhaps sixty, in a grey suit jacket over a collarless shirt, the jacket worn at the cuffs and pressed at the lapels — the dress of a man who had once been somewhere it mattered how

he looked. He drove an old diesel saloon with a cracked windscreen and a prayer-bead tassel gone smooth from handling. He looked at Jakobus's boots before he looked at his face, and something in him eased a fraction. *Good*, Jakobus thought. *He knows what the wrong shoe costs out here too.*

"You walk a long way in these," Yusuf said, in Arabic — not the Arabic of a course, the swallowed, idiomatic, kitchen Arabic of the region. Jakobus answered in the same register, regional and a little wrong-for-a-textbook, and watched the old man's shoulders come down another notch. *This one learned us from us.* They did the full courtesy of it then, unhurried, in the dust beside the car: health, the road, the weather, God's name set into the seams of the small-talk the way a stone is set into a wall. Jakobus asked after Yusuf's people and water and the state of the way ahead, in that order, and Yusuf answered all three plainly, and only when the ritual had run its proper length did the old man open the boot. "Now. Your bag," he said, dry. "And there is no second seat for what you do not need to carry."

The bag was already light. Jakobus had been shedding it for weeks, country by country, hand by hand, and there was a clean pleasure in that lightness he did not examine too closely. He put what he had in the boot, and they went south, and the land changed the way it always changed near a border that men had fought over: emptier, then stranger, then marked.

He read the scars from the passenger seat the way he read everything, without comment. An abandoned post first — a concrete pillbox with its firing slit gone to shadow, the road around it cratered and patched and cratered again, a generation of repairs you could date like rings in a tree. Then a fence that went nowhere, posts leaning, wire long ago harvested for someone's goat-pen. Then the signs. He knew them before he could read them, knew them by the shape and the red and the small clear skull-and-bones idiom every army on earth had agreed on without ever meeting: *mines*. Old triangles wired to the fence, the paint faded to a rust-pink the colour of the granite he no longer carried. Beyond them the ground looked exactly like the ground that was safe, which was the whole horror of it. *Africa does not have a safe fifty metres*, he thought, and then: *neither does this*. A camel-thorn through a flip-flop on the walk to the ablution block. The dismissive little choice, the one that maims you. He kept his eyes

on the marked side and his thoughts off the boy's stone in another man's pocket a thousand kilometres behind him.

"They cleared the road," Yusuf said, following his look without turning his head. "Not the fields. Never the fields. The road is for the trucks; the fields are for nobody now." He said it the way a man says a thing he has said many times, to many passengers, the grief sanded off it by use. "My brother had olives there." He lifted two fingers off the wheel, the smallest possible gesture toward a hillside of nothing. "Now nobody has olives there." And that was all. No politics in it, no blame Jakobus could have agreed or disagreed with. A man, and his brother, and the olives that were no longer anyone's. Jakobus said nothing, because there was nothing his nothing could improve, and the silence he gave back was the only respect that fit.

The checkpoint came up out of a heat-shimmer: two containers, a boom, a roof of corrugated sheet throwing a band of black shade across the road. Jakobus took the shades off before they were waved to stop. He did it the way he always did it — not a flourish, just gone, folded one-handed into the waistcoat — so that by the time the soldier leaned to the window there was already a tired man with light-coloured eyes squinting honestly into the glare, nothing behind them, nothing to find. The soldier was young, and bored, and held his rifle the way the bored hold rifles, slung and forgotten, and Jakobus clocked the safety on it and where the man's weight sat and the dozen other small sums he could not stop himself doing and did not act on, would never act on, because a hand reaching is a hand searched, and the whole craft was to be the man no one bothered to search.

Yusuf did the talking. This was Yusuf's gate, his register, his social weather, and Jakobus had long ago learned that the surest way to lose a crossing was to be useful at it when it was not yours to be useful at. So he sat, hands loose on his knees, and watched papers go from Yusuf's pressed cuff to the young soldier's hand and back, and let the questions about him be answered by a man the soldier half-knew and wholly believed. *Heritage. Photographs. The columns. UNESCO* — a word the soldier turned over like a coin he had been told was real. The young man looked at Jakobus once, properly, and Jakobus gave him the bare eyes and the small tired nod of a man with nothing to hide and a long way still to go, and the soldier looked away first, the way they did, and Jakobus thought, the way he always

thought, that he was glad it was a boy this time and not a man with something to prove.

A second soldier, older, came out of the shade and read the permit again, slower, and the slow second read was the dangerous one — Jakobus felt the room narrow, felt the want to do something rise in him and held it down by the throat — but the older man was only tired in a different key, and at the end of it he stamped the page with the flat boredom of a man stamping the hundredth page of the day, and the boom went up. Yusuf said something gentle and final, a blessing or near it, and they rolled through into the white afternoon, and Jakobus did not put the shades back on for a while. He let the glare hurt his eyes. It was a small honesty he allowed himself, on the far side of a gate, the way a man unclenches a fist.

“You don’t carry a gun,” Yusuf said, a few kilometres on. Not a question.

“No.”

The old man nodded slowly, watching the road. “Good. They smell it. The young ones especially — a man with a gun makes them feel small, and a small man with a rifle is the most dangerous thing on this road.” He glanced over, and there was the ghost of amusement in the seams of his face. “You knew that already. You took your eyes out for them like a fish on a stall. I have not seen a foreigner do that. They keep the black glasses on and think it makes them important.”

“It makes them watched,” Jakobus said.

“Yes.” Yusuf was quiet a while. “You have done this before. Not this — not the columns, the photographs. But this.” A small turn of the wrist that took in the road, the gate behind them, the whole grammar of getting through. “I drove a man like you once. Years ago. He didn’t come back.” He let it sit, and then, kindly, did not make Jakobus answer it. “Anyway. The columns. You want to know what is there, and what is not.”

“I want to know what’s still standing.”

“Hah.” It was almost a laugh, almost not. “That is the right question. Everyone else asks what was destroyed. The destruction they can see on their telephones. What stands —” he tapped the wheel — “that you have to come for.”

They reached the inn at dusk, a low building the colour of the dirt it sat on, a string of bare bulbs over a yard where two other cars waited and a generator coughed somewhere out of sight. Yusuf knew the man who kept it; of course he did. There was tea, and Jakobus drank it, and there was a stew of something he did not ask about and ate all of, and a woman's hand set the bread down without a face attached to it and took the empty plate away the same way, and he was, for an hour, simply a guest at a table in a country that had every reason to turn him out and did not. He thought of Farzana's bread, still in his bag, going stale in its cloth, and did not eat it; some bread you keep.

A younger man — the keeper's son, or nephew, he didn't fix which — was driving the last leg's road in his own car and eating at the next table, and when he heard *Tadmur*, the old name, Palmyra's true name, he leaned over unasked. He had the certainty of the local who has watched the foreigners come and get it wrong.

"You go to the columns," he said. "Listen. The road is fine now, the day road. Don't go at night. There are still places —" he made a flat sweep of his hand, the ground beyond the road, the same gesture Yusuf had made for the olives — "where you walk where you are told and nowhere else. There is a man there, his name is Tariq, he keeps it. Not the government — *he keeps it*. You ask for him. You do not go in alone, you do not climb on the stones, you do not pick up *anything* from the ground." He held Jakobus's eye to be sure the last one landed. "Men have lost a hand picking up a pretty thing from that ground."

"I don't pick things up," Jakobus said. It was almost true now. He thought of the boy's stone and amended it, privately, to: *not anymore*.

"Good." The young man went back to his stew, satisfied, and Jakobus understood he had just been handed something — not a key exactly, but the shape of the next gate and the name of the man who held it, passed across a table by someone who owed him nothing and gave it anyway.

He slept badly, which he had expected; the moon was building toward full and his body knew it before the calendar did. He lay on the narrow cot with his boots by the door and the scarf folded under his head, tired in the marrow, tired in a way the four hours would not touch — the kind of tired that came not from the walking but from the *seeing*.

Too many sites, too many gates, too much carried and set down. He was very nearly spent, and he knew it, and he did not let it become anything. One more. The columns. The man called Tariq, who kept them. The last gate, and then south and out, and after that he did not let himself think, because thinking past the last gate was how a man stopped reaching for it.

He turned the prayer-tassel logic of it over in the dark — Omar to Yusuf to a keeper's nephew to a name. A chain of strangers, each one a hand on the rope, none of them his, all of them holding. It was the only way in. It had always been the only way in. You did not buy your way to the columns and you did not fight your way there; you were *handed* there, gate by gate, by people who had decided, each in their turn, that you could be trusted with what remained.

Before first light he made his coffee in the yard with the little screw-together pot on the single burner, slow, the one ceremony he would not skip, and watched the dark go grey over a border that had eaten its olives and kept its mines. Yusuf came out, smelled it, held out a hand without asking. Jakobus poured him a cup, and they drank it together in the cold while the generator slept, two men with nothing to say and no need to say it, the road south going pale in front of them, the last gate somewhere out there in the heat that had not yet started, waiting to be reached.

Chapter 16 — Among the Columns

The road came over a low rise and the desert opened, and there they were.

Jakobus had seen them in photographs the way everyone had — the great colonnade marching off toward the hills, the broken teeth of the temple, the arch that was no longer an arch. Photographs did them a flat injustice. From the rise they did not look like ruins. They looked like a city that had simply stopped being attended to for an afternoon, and the afternoon had lasted seventeen hundred years. Pale honey stone in the low sun, a long avenue of pillars, and beyond them the palms, and beyond those the dun shoulders of the mountains. Wind moved sand across the road in thin shifting tongues.

Yusuf's son-in-law had handed him over an hour back, at a junction with no name, to a man with a pickup and a habit of watching his side mirrors more than the road ahead. That man had stopped now, two hundred metres short of the first checkpoint, and was not getting out.

"From here," he said in Arabic, "you walk to the gate and you ask for Tariq. You say nothing of who sent you. You wait."

Jakobus took his bag and his coffee pot, and his thanks were the kind you give without words — a hand to the chest, the slight bow that is not servility. The pickup was already turning before he had the bag on his shoulder.

The checkpoint was sandbags and a shipping container and three soldiers, and a fourth asleep in the shade of the container, in a plastic

chair tipped back against the steel. Jakobus took the shades off before any of them looked up. He folded them into the breast pocket of the vest and let his eyes do what they did, which was sit there in the light, watering a little, hiding nothing. A grey morning. The eyes would be grey.

The senior man wanted papers and Jakobus gave him papers — the ones with the heritage-survey stamp and the NGO letterhead — and the man read them upside down for a while and then the right way up, and asked questions Jakobus answered in the colloquial. Not the radio Arabic; the kitchen kind, the kind you got from a thousand cups of tea. The man's face did the thing he was waiting for: the small softening of a man who hears his own street in a stranger's mouth.

It nearly went wrong anyway. The senior man got on a radio and there was a long exchange Jakobus did not follow all of, and the word *permit* came up twice, in tones that meant *we don't have to* and *it would be easier not to*. A name was disputed. There was a colonel somewhere who had to be telephoned and a colonel somewhere who could not be reached, and for a quarter of an hour Jakobus stood in the sun and drank the water he was offered from a jerry-can cup and said nothing and took up as little space as a man can take up, which after a lifetime of practice was very little indeed.

The heat got into him the way it always did. Not the dawn cold of the high places, which he owned; the flat, white, windless heat of the deep desert at midmorning, the one weather he had never found a trick for. He felt it in his throat and behind his eyes, and he drank the water and stood in the thin line of shade the container threw and waited the way a stone waits.

It was the asleep soldier who fixed it. He woke, tipped his chair down, looked at Jakobus a while with the unhurried hostility of the just-woken, and then said something to the senior man that Jakobus caught only the end of — *the German lady's project, last year, the one with the drawings* — and the senior man's face changed, and the radio went away, and a stamp was found, and a young soldier was detailed to walk Jakobus up to the gate so that the matter would be on someone else's hands.

"Tariq," Jakobus said, to the young soldier, as they walked. "You know him."

The boy snorted. "Everyone knows Tariq. He has been telling us how to do our jobs for two years."

Tariq was at the base of a column, on his knees, with a brush.

He was perhaps sixty, in a grey shirt gone white at the seams and trousers that had been good once, and he held a soft brush in one hand and was working sand out of a carved acanthus capital that had fallen and lay now on its side at the foot of the column it had once crowned. He did not look up when the soldier announced Jakobus. He finished the line he was clearing, blew the dust gently off the leaf-edge, and only then sat back on his heels and looked.

He took Jakobus in the way Yusuf had — the boots first. The Jim Greens, road-beaten, resoled, the dust on them two countries deep. Tariq's eyes went down to the boots and back up, and something in his shoulders settled.

"You walked here," he said. It was not a question and it was not about the last two hundred metres.

"A long way," Jakobus said.

"They sent a man who walks." Tariq set the brush down on a folded cloth, carefully, bristles up. "Better than the ones who fly in and want to stand where the man was killed and have their picture taken. You want that?"

"No."

"Good." He got up, slow, a hand on the fallen capital for the push. "Then I will show you what is here. And what is not." He looked at the soldier. "He is mine now. Go and sleep."

The colonnade had been a street once — a kilometre and more of it, double rows of columns thirty feet high, and over each capital a bracket where a statue had stood: a citizen, a benefactor, a name. Tariq walked it slowly and Jakobus walked beside him and the wind came down the avenue and moved the sand.

"Here," Tariq said, and stopped, and pointed not at a thing but at an absence — a stretch where the columns simply ended, a gap of bare

ground and rubble, and then the line picking up again. “Baalshamin.” He said the name the way you say the name of someone in the next room who has died. “The temple of the lord of the heavens. Two thousand years. It stood through the Romans and the Persians and the Arabs and the Turks and the French and all of us — all of it — two thousand years of people who could not agree about anything agreeing not to knock it down.” He stood looking at the empty ground. “They put it on the internet. The blowing-up. So that we could all watch.”

He did not raise his voice. Jakobus had learned long ago that the men who had been nearest the worst of it told it the flattest. He kept his own mouth shut and let it stand.

“The cella was small,” Tariq said. “Smaller than people think from the pictures. You could stand in it and touch both walls if you had long arms. The carving on the lintel — vine, and a winged thing — I had it by heart. I could draw it for you now.” He held up a hand, the fingers tracing a curl in the air, then let it fall. “There is nothing to draw it from anymore. Only my hand.”

They walked on. Tariq showed him the scars the way a doctor shows you an X-ray — not for pity, for accuracy. The pock and gouge of small-arms in the soft stone, a column face stitched with it. A drum knocked clean off its fellows and lying in the dust, three tonnes of it, where the blast had thrown it. The Temple of Bel, the great one, the heart of the place — reduced now to its gate and a few standing walls and a vast flat field of cut stone laid out in rows, every block tagged where the workers had numbered the pieces: a temple turned back into the quarry it came from, waiting.

“They are good stones,” Tariq said, of the numbered field. “Do you see? Each one knows where it goes. We wrote it down before, the ones of us who knew. We measured. We have the drawings. A stone is not gone if you know where it goes.” He crouched and laid his hand flat on the top of a numbered block, the way another man might lay a hand on the flank of a horse. “It is sleeping. That is all. It is a long sleep and I will not see the waking, but it is sleeping, not dead.”

He took Jakobus to the place last, and he took him there without ceremony, which was the only kind of mercy the place allowed.

It was near the museum, an ordinary patch of ground, and there was nothing to mark it but a stone someone had stood on end and written on, in paint gone faded, a few words in Arabic. Tariq stopped a little short of it.

“Khaled al-Assad,” he said. “He kept this place forty years. He knew where everything was — not in a book, in his head. They wanted him to tell them where the gold was, the treasures, the things to sell. There was no gold. He had spent his life telling people there was no gold; it was never about gold. He would not tell them what little he could have told — the hidden things, the things he had moved to keep them safe. He was eighty-one years old.”

He stopped. The wind came down the colonnade.

“They did it here,” Tariq said, “so that the columns would watch. That was the point of it. Not him only — the columns. To make us see that the columns could not protect even the man who loved them most.” He turned his head and looked at Jakobus, and for the first time there was something asking in his face. “You understand? It was not him they were killing. It was the idea that any of this is worth dying for. They wanted to prove it was not.”

Jakobus held the old man’s eyes. He did not look away to the painted stone, because looking away would have been the easy thing and the wrong thing. “And were they right,” he said. Not a question either. An offering.

Tariq looked at him a long moment. Then he turned and started back toward the columns, and over his shoulder, without heat, he said: “I am still here.”

There were four of them working at the far end of the avenue, in the shade of the last standing trio of columns, around a long trestle of rough planks. Two old men and two not yet thirty, and laid out on the trestle were the fragments — carved pieces no larger than a man’s two hands, broken edges raw and pale, and beside them a tray of numbered tags and a bucket of water and brushes and a thing that looked like a dentist’s tools rolled in a cloth.

They were fitting fragments back to fragments. It was the slowest work Jakobus had ever watched. A young man held two pieces edge

to edge, turned one a degree, then another degree, then set it down and picked up a third. The old man beside him had a fragment in his lap and was cleaning the broken face of it with a brush and a wooden pick, freeing the grain of the break so the next piece could find it.

Tariq said something to them and they looked up, and they looked at Jakobus's boots, all of them, and then went back to the work.

Jakobus set his bag down against a column. He took off the vest and folded it over the bag, because it was too hot for it and because a man does not stand over working people in his harness. He rolled his sleeves, which left the arms bare — the small outline of Africa on the one forearm and the flowing Arabic on the soft inner skin of it — and one of the old men saw the Arabic and went still, and read it, and his lips moved, and he looked up at Jakobus with a new thing in his face that he did not say. Jakobus did not explain it. You do not explain a thing the desert put on you.

"Can I," Jakobus said, in the kitchen Arabic, and gestured at the bucket, the brushes, the work.

The old man who had read his arm moved up the bench and made a space.

So Jakobus worked. They gave him the dullest task, which was the right task to give a stranger — clearing dirt from the broken faces, freeing the grain, no fitting, no decisions, nothing he could ruin. He took a fragment in his lap, a piece of carved frond gone tan with weathering, the break across it pale as bone, and he took the brush and the wooden pick, and he cleared the dirt of seventeen centuries out of the wound where it had been struck from the whole — slow, slow, the way you clear a child's grazed knee. His hands were clean. His mother's law: the clothes are the weather, the hands are the man. He freed the grain and blew the dust off soft and handed the piece up, and the young man took it without looking, the way you take a tool from someone you have decided is part of the work, and tried it against another piece, and it did not fit, and he set it in the row of *not yet*, and reached for the next.

No one spoke much. The wind moved the sand. Somewhere a generator coughed and ran and quit. Jakobus cleared fragments and his back ached and the heat sat on him and he did not say a word about any of it, and after a long time he understood that the silence

around the trestle was not the silence of strangers. It was the silence of people doing a thing together that was too large to talk over.

When the light began to go long and the worst of the heat lifted off the stone, Tariq came and sat beside him on an upturned bucket and watched his hands work for a while.

"You are good at this," Tariq said. "You do not rush it."

"There's no rushing it."

"No." Tariq picked up a fragment, turned it, set it down. "People come and they want to help and they want it finished while they are watching, so they can carry it home — *I helped rebuild Palmyra*. This is not finished while anyone is watching. This is fifty years. This is two of those boys becoming old men, and their sons after them, and maybe — *maybe* — a wall." He said it without bitterness, the way you state a fact about weather. "There is no end to come at the end of. There is only the morning, and you go to the columns, and you clear one stone, and you go home, and you come back. That is all there is. That is the whole of it."

Jakobus held the fragment in his lap. He thought of the man who had been carried to water down a song he would never be allowed to know, and of the boy in the south he had given a black stone to, and of the bread folded in his bag from a valley with empty niches in it, that someone, somewhere, was also clearing one grain at a time, forever, for nothing that would finish while they lived.

"People call it brave," Jakobus said. "What you do. Staying."

Tariq made a small sound, not quite a laugh. "Brave." He turned the word over the way the boy turned the fragments, looking for the edge that fit. "Brave is the man who flew in to stand where Khaled was killed. He was very brave for one afternoon and then he flew home." He stood, his knees telling him about it, and looked down the long avenue of columns going gold now in the falling light — the gaps in them, the watching gaps. "It is not brave to do the thing you cannot stop doing. It is only what you are." He put a hand on Jakobus's shoulder, once, and took it away. "Clean two more before the dark. Then there is tea."

He walked off down the colonnade toward the others, an old man in a white-seamed shirt among the columns that had not been able to

save the man who loved them most, going to clear one stone before the light failed, and one tomorrow, and one after that, for fifty years he would not see the end of.

Jakobus picked up the next fragment, and the wooden pick, and bent his clean hands to the broken face of it, and began, very slowly, to free the grain.

Chapter 99 — Notes, Sources, and Responsible Wondering

This is a novel about what is still standing after men tried to take it away, and a man who goes to look and hand the looking back.

Ur is real. The Ziggurat of Ur rises out of Dhi Qar near Nasiriyah, its stepped mass ancient at the core and its façade partly rebuilt in the modern era — work begun in the 1960s and continued since — which is why the lines look so clean to a tourist eye. The ziggurat itself survived the fighting of the last decades; what was plundered around it in 2003 was smaller, nearer-to-hand things. UNESCO, the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, and teaching resources like Smarthistory will show you the stone and explain the careful difference between an ancient structure and a modern stabilization.

Babylon is real. The Ishtar Gate that most of us picture is in Berlin at the Pergamon Museum — original glazed bricks lifted and kept there. At the site near Hillah, the gate and walls stand in reconstruction on original footprints, with additions from a later regime that are documented and rightly argued over. Babylon's inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site came in 2019, and the listing materials say plainly what is original and what is not.

Nineveh — the mounds by Mosul and the museums that hold its guardians — is real. Lamassu, the human-headed winged bulls that watched the gates, stand now in the British Museum and other collections; the ones still on the ground in Iraq were shattered or carried off during the ISIL occupation from 2014 to 2017. The scar is not

a rumour; UNESCO wrote it down, and UNITAR-UNOSAT mapped it from orbit. What has followed in Mosul is work — slow, skilled, international and local — to document, to train, to rebuild where rebuilding is honest.

Bamiyan is real. The great Buddhas were destroyed in March 2001. Their niches remain in the cliff — emptiness made architectural — and the valley below is still lived in. The site was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2003. If you have only seen the before-and-after photographs, you have missed the present tense of the place.

Palmyra is real. The colonnade is still there — long ranks of pale stone in the desert light — and the gaps are there where the Temple of Bel, the Temple of Baalshamin, and the Arch of Triumph were reduced to rubble in 2015–2017 by ISIL. Some restoration has begun. Khaled al-~~Assad~~ Assad, who gave his life to the keeping of that city, was murdered in 2015. UNESCO's site pages and UNITAR-UNOSAT's damage assessments carry the record; even the broadcasters who move on quickly kept that story long enough to name him.

A word I have to say out loud once for the record and then let the book carry it: people made these things. Not visitors from elsewhere. Not a vanished race with magic. People — cleverer and more patient than the voiceover that reaches for aliens when it meets brown stone it cannot read on the first pass. The refusal to credit a maker is not wonder. It is the poison that keeps us from seeing the work.

Jakobus Swart does not save any of this. He is not sent to arbitrate faiths or wars. He walks in, listens hard, carries tea and permits and sometimes brushes, and he leaves the keeping where it was. The expertise in this story belongs to the custodians who never left the ground.

Real / Debated / Invented

Real	Debated	Invented
Ziggurat of Ur: ancient core; partly reconstructed façade from the 1960s onward; site near Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar (UNESCO; Iraqi State Board of Antiquities; Smarthistory).	Access and security in 2026 — variable by checkpoint and region; routes change and should not be inferred from a novel.	Every person Jakobus speaks to — Nadia, Hakim, Farzana, Tariq, Omar, Yusuf — and every line of dialogue.
Babylon: Ishtar Gate originals in Berlin (Pergamon Museum); on-site reconstructions on original foundations; Saddam-era rebuilding controversies; UNESCO inscription in 2019.	The ethics and scope of past and future reconstructions at Babylon and elsewhere — degrees and methods are argued in conservation circles.	Jakobus, his commission, his fixer chain, his permits and phone calls, the precise sequence of checkpoints.
Nineveh/Mosul: Assyrian lamassu in the British Museum and other collections; site lamassu and reliefs destroyed/looted 2014–2017 during ISIL control; post-liberation documentation and reconstruction initiatives; UNESCO and UNITAR–UNOSAT reporting.	The pace and final form of lamassu and gate reconstructions in Mosul — ongoing projects with evolving techniques and timelines.	The specific workshop scenes and who lets him through which gate.

Real	Debated	Invented
Bamiyan: the Buddha statues were destroyed in March 2001; empty niches remain; valley life continues; UNESCO World Heritage since 2003.	How, whether, and when to reconstruct or present the niches — an active, multi-party debate; the novel does not take a side.	The precise guides and the bread and the words shared in the valley.
Palmyra: Temple of Bel, Temple of Baalshamin, Arch of Triumph suffered documented destruction 2015–2017 (ISIL); partial restoration is underway; Khaled al-Assad was killed in 2015; UNESCO, UNITAR-UNOSAT, and BBC have reported extensively.	Future restoration scope at Palmyra — what to rebuild versus conserve as witness is contested among professionals and communities.	The bench of fragments Jakobus is allowed to clean, and the day's light when he does it.
Cross-cutting: 2003 looting around Ur; conflict damage documented by UNESCO/UNOSAT; living communities around all these sites.	How much any visitor should be on the ground at all — ethics of access in conflict and post-conflict zones are rightly argued.	The timing of Jakobus's crossings and any implied endorsements of travel methods.

If you take one thing from this table, let it be this: every physical claim above is checkable in the public record. The marvels do not need my invention to be astonishing, and they deserve not to be improved.

On wondering responsibly, and on going there

These are living places in countries that have carried more than their share of headlines. Access changes. The rope, the closed gate, the soldier at the boom — they are not there to spite your curiosity. They are the reason anything is left for anyone.

If you go at all — and for most readers, the responsible choice is to learn from afar for now — go inside the law and with the people who keep the place. Hire licensed local guides and listen more than you speak. Do not step past ropes or onto walls to get a better angle. Do not pick anything up from the ground, however “disconnected” it looks. Treat mine signs and marked ground as absolute. Do not geotag sensitive work areas. Pay fairly. Spend money in the towns that neighbor the sites, not only at the gate.

If you cannot go — which will be the right call in many seasons — learn from the custodians at a distance. Start with the UNESCO World Heritage Centre pages for Ur, Babylon, Bamiyan, and Palmyra. Read the UNITAR–UNOSAT satellite damage assessments for Palmyra and Mosul to understand what the words “documented loss” mean when you cannot stand there. See the Ishtar Gate in Berlin and the lamassu in the British Museum, and let the museum labels teach you what left and why. Support reputable heritage organizations that work with, not over, local authorities when emergencies come.

And remember that wonder does not require a visa. Custody does. The keeping belongs to the people who were there before you and will be there after you. Your presence is not neutral. Let the gatekeeper own the telling.

Acknowledgments

To the archaeologists, conservators, guards, and community custodians who keep these places upright in hard weather — this book tries to carry your patient work without making a trophy of it.

To UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre and to UNITAR–UNOSAT, whose sober reports are the backbone of any honest account of loss and repair. To the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage for keeping

the record at Ur and Babylon. To the British Museum for the public record of the lamassu in its care. To Smarthistory and to reporting like the BBC's on Palmyra and on the killing of Khaled al-ʿAssad. For legal context on cultural destruction, to scholarship collected in venues like the UGA Law Review.

This is a work of fiction. The ground is real and the institutions named above are real; everyone Jakobus speaks to in these pages is invented. A multi-faith, regionally grounded sensitivity read preceded publication; where I erred, the error is mine and fixable, and nothing here is meant to adjudicate anyone's war or anyone's faith.

— *for the keepers who stayed when the cameras left.*

