

HISTORY BEFORE TIME

THE ROSE IN THE ROCK

A tomb cut like a promise.

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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 — The Job in Amman

The heat met him at the airbridge, before the building, the way it always did in this part of the world — a flat hand laid against the chest, the dry kind that takes the water out of you without the courtesy of sweat. Jakobus stepped off into it and let it have him for a second, the way you let a dog smell your hand. Forty-something in the shade, and there was no shade. He kept his arms bare under the open shirt and the loaded vest and did not reach for water yet. There would be a queue first, and the queue was its own desert.

Queen Alia at midday was a machine for moving the patient and breaking the impatient. He stood in the line for the visa stamp and read the room the way another man reads a paper. The two Gulf businessmen ahead of him, soft-shouldered, used to being waved through, irritated to be standing. The family behind — the grandmother in black who had done this a hundred times and would do it a hundred more without a flicker. The young officer at the booth whose stamp came down hard because his feet hurt and his shift was long.

When his turn came Jakobus pushed the wraparounds up and folded them into a vest pocket. The light went into his eyes, and his eyes — he knew — went pale and unguarded in it, the one part of him that couldn't keep a secret, which was exactly why he gave it freely here. *Nothing to hide*. The fastest way through any door in the world is to be seen as too dull to bother with.

"*Salām*," he said, and then the rest of it the way the people said it and not the way the textbook did — the swallowed consonants of a

tongue learned at fires and not in a classroom, *kīf ʔālak, ya zalameh*, the small wrong-for-a-grammar turns that were right for a kitchen. The officer's eyes lifted off the passport. Something in him softened a half-degree. *This one didn't learn us from a book.*

"South Africa," the officer said, in English now, the courtesy paid, free to relax. "Business?"

"A friend's debt," Jakobus said, which was true and meant nothing, and that was the best kind of answer. The stamp came down softer than it had for the businessmen. He took the passport — one of the better ones; he had others — and put the shades back on as he walked away, and the world went merciful and brown again.

She was waiting past the baggage hall, and he knew her before she knew him because she was the only one not pretending to be relaxed. Tall, fair, a camera bag worn like a sidearm and two hard cases at her feet she had not let a porter touch. She was already looking at her phone and the doors and her watch, three things that would not move faster for being looked at.

"Voss," he said.

"You're Swart." She gave his soft belly and his open shirt and his too-big knife a quarter-second and filed him somewhere unimpressive, which suited him. "You're late."

"The plane was late. I came on it."

That earned him nothing. She was already moving, towing one of the cases, expecting him to take the other, which he did, because it was heavy and she had carried it alone since Frankfurt and there was no point making a thing of it. Lena Voss, German, documentary work, a list of photographs in her head arranged by light and by hour. He could see the list on her the way he could see the camel-thorn through a flip-flop. She wanted the Treasury at the gold hour. She wanted the slot-canyon walls with one figure for scale. She wanted, he suspected, exactly what eleven thousand other lenses had already taken — only cleaner.

"Three days," she said in the car park, while he found the hired Cruiser among the rows — not the Beast, the Beast was an ocean away, but a serviceable local thing with a snorkel somebody had bolted on for a brochure. "I have a shot list. First light at the Siq, second day the

Royal Tombs, third day the Monastery if my knees hold. The survey is — what. An afternoon.”

“The survey’s why I’m paid,” he said, mild. He stowed her cases so they wouldn’t shift and slammed the tailgate. “Photographs are why you’re paid. We’ll get to your light.”

“We’ll get to it when I say, or it’s not worth the flight.” She wasn’t unkind. She was a professional with a deadline and a client, and he respected that even as he understood already that the three days she’d planned and the three days she’d have were not going to be the same three days. He didn’t tell her. You don’t tell the river it’s about to bend.

The King’s Highway ran south out of the city through stone country that grew older and emptier as the buildings thinned. He drove the way he always drove — the seconds wide and unhurried, one hand light on the wheel, reading the road’s intentions a kilometre ahead. Lena shot through the window for the first hour and then stopped, because the glass was killing her exposures, and sat back and looked at the land instead, which was better for her than any photograph. The land here did not perform. It simply was, in red and ochre and the blue-grey of distance — the way Africa was when you got far enough out into it.

She fell asleep somewhere past the turnoffs she didn’t recognise. He let her. A sleeping passenger is one who isn’t managing you.

Wadi Musa came up the way these towns do — a smear of white and dun buildings climbing a hillside above the gorge the world came to see, the town that lived off the wonder and lived, mostly, with its back to it. He pulled in at a tea place at the foot of a switchback, where the plastic chairs were out and a man his own age sat in the shade of an awning that did its job.

The man watched the Cruiser stop. He watched Jakobus get out and stretch the drive out of his back, and he watched the way Jakobus stood — feet a little wide, weight even, taking the place in before he took a step into it — and Jakobus watched him watch, and something passed between them, dry and immediate: the recognition of two men who both knew that the first thing you do in a new place is read it.

“You’d be Sami,” Jakobus said.

“And you’d be the favour Tariq called in.” Sami al-Hadid stood without hurry, lean and sun-cured, hands that had moved more stone than the brochures admitted. He looked at the loaded vest, the kukri on the thigh, the bare arms, the boots — and at the boots his eyes stopped, the way Jakobus’s own eyes stopped at other men’s feet, and something there decided in his favour. “You’ve worn those a while.”

“Resoled, not replaced.”

“Hm.” Sami tipped his head at the chairs. “Tea, then we talk.”

Lena was awake now, climbing out, blinking at the town, already disappointed it wasn’t the gorge. “How far to the site? I want to scout the Siq before dark.”

“You want tea before the Siq,” Sami said, not turning, “or you’ll photograph it like a man who has not slept.” He said it pleasantly, and it was not a suggestion.

The tea came in small glasses, sweet and scalding, mint laid in. Jakobus paid before Lena had her purse open, the coins out of his vest in one motion, and Sami noted that too — who pays first, and how — and said nothing, because some things you only note.

“The job,” Sami said, when they were sitting. “She photographs. You verify a survey for the heritage people — water structures, the upper wadis. Tariq owed a man, the man owes the department, the department wants eyes that know what they’re looking at and won’t make a story of it.” He looked at Jakobus. “You read made things.”

“I read what a thing’s for.”

“Good. Most don’t. Most come for the Treasury.” Sami said the word the way you’d say a child’s mispronunciation you’d given up correcting. “First light, the Siq. But not for her postcard.” He turned the glass in his fingers. “I’ll take you up the wadi above the city first. Where the water came from. You want to understand this place, you don’t start at the pretty face. You start where the rain was caught.”

“The shot list,” Lena began.

“The shot list will be better,” Sami said, “when you know what you are

looking at. The face will still be there at the gold hour. It has been there two thousand years. It will wait one morning while you learn what it is sitting on top of.”

Lena’s mouth set. She looked to Jakobus to overrule the guide, the foreigner to the foreigner, and found him already nodding — slow, settled, a man who had heard the local say *start where the rain was caught* and recognised the sentence as the truest thing said all day.

“It’s his ground,” Jakobus said. “We go his way.”

“You’re being paid to drive me, not to—”

“I’m being paid to get you the thing you actually came for.” He drank his tea down. “Which you don’t know yet. He does.”

Sami didn’t smile, but the dryness in him shifted a degree, the way a man’s face changes when a stranger turns out to be less of an idiot than the odds suggested. He set his glass down empty.

“Dawn,” he said. “The gate before the buses. Wear better shoes than that—” to Lena, without malice “—and bring more water than you think. The Siq fools people. It feels like nothing, that little walk. There is no nothing here. The ground has been killing the unprepared for two thousand years and it is in no hurry to stop.”

He stood, and was gone up the switchback into the white town, and Jakobus sat a moment longer in the shade with the heat pressing on the awning and the gorge somewhere below them, full of the thing the whole world came to see, and felt the small click of a job that was not going to be small after all — the friction of three rhythms finding they had to become one, his and hers and the place’s, and the place’s winning, as it should.

He paid for a second round of tea Lena didn’t want, and drank it, and watched the light go long and amber on the stone.

Chapter 2 — The Siq: Stone and Shadow

The gate opened at six and the line was already a hundred deep.

Jakobus had been at the front of worse queues — borders where the men behind the glass got paid to make you wait, where the waiting was the toll. This one was tourists, which was its own kind of slow. Couples in matching technical jackets that had never once seen rain. A pack of students with cameras worth more than the Beast's gearbox slung across their chests. A man in pristine white trainers, the leather still creaking, who would regret them by mid-morning and never know why. Jakobus clocked the trainers and let it go, the way he let go of most things he couldn't fix.

The ticket ritual was simple and slow on purpose. A turnstile, a printed slip, a man in a green Park polo behind a counter who took the slip, looked at it, looked at you, looked at it again. Jakobus had the shades pushed up into his hair already — he'd done it at the car, before they walked in, so that by the time he reached any uniform his eyes were just out, ordinary, nothing behind them to wonder about. Bare eyes for the gatekeeper. The fastest currency there was. The man in green barely glanced at him, glanced longer at Lena, at the kit, at the long lens. Cameras made everyone slower.

"He'll want a permit number for the survey," Sami said, not turning his head. "I have it."

"Then we're fine."

"We're fine when he says we're fine."

Jakobus said nothing to that, because it was true and there was noth-

ing to add to a true thing. He stood with his weight even, hands loose, the waistcoat heavy across his shoulders over the open shirt, his bare arms cool in the predawn. Around him, two hundred people were buying water. A boy with a coolbox worked the line, half-litre bottles sweating in the grey light, a hand reaching for every one. Jakobus had his own — two, in the side pockets of the waistcoat, and the canteen — and the day was going to ask for all of it and then some. He watched the white-trainer man buy a single small bottle and felt something close to grief about it.

Lena got her permit checked, got her slip stamped, and was three strides ahead before the man in green had finished saying whatever he was saying.

“She walks like she’s late for something,” Sami said.

“She is. It’s just always.”

Sami made a sound that wasn’t quite a laugh.

They went down the broad open approach first — the part the brochures skipped, the part Jakobus liked best so far, because nothing was performing yet. Just a wide dry valley, the Bab as-Siq, a few free-standing tomb fronts cut shallow into the low cliffs on either side, the sun not yet over the rim. Donkeys stood in a string by a wall, ears swivelling. A man called *carriage*, *carriage* without much hope in it. The dust smelled of animal and of the cold that hadn’t burned off, and under that, faint, the diesel of the bus park behind them.

Lena stopped at the Djinn Blocks — three huge squared masses of stone standing free of the cliff — and lifted the camera. “What are these.”

“God-blocks,” Sami said. “Or tombs. Or markers. We argue about it.” He shrugged with one shoulder. “Some things they did not write down, so now we get to be clever about them forever.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“No. It’s the honest one.” Sami started walking again. “Come. The good part is in the dark.”

The Siq began the way a door begins — a narrowing, a cool breath off stone that had not seen the sun yet today and would not for hours.

The walls came up on either side and kept coming, fifty metres, eighty, more, leaning in until the strip of sky overhead was a torn ribbon, pale and far. Jakobus felt the temperature drop on his bare arms and welcomed it. The crowd funnelled with him, two hundred people pressed from a wide valley into a corridor three, four paces across, and the sound changed — every footfall, every voice, every shutter doubled and tripled off the rock and came back softened, the way sound is in a church or a cave, a place that swallows you and gives you back smaller.

The stone was rose. Rose and ochre and bands of grey-purple where the iron and the manganese ran, the colour shifting as the angle shifted, alive in a way painted things never are. People stopped to photograph it and the corridor jammed behind them. Lena went around them, over a rope, ducked low past a guide's raised arm, and was gone ahead into the curve.

Jakobus did not go after her. Sami did not either. The fixer in him noted her position, her speed, the bottleneck thirty metres on where she would have to slow or stop, and filed it. She wasn't lost. She was leading a parade no one had asked her to lead.

"She'll get her picture," Sami said.

"She'll get a hundred of the wrong one."

"And one of the right one. That's the job, no?" Sami stopped. He put a hand flat against the wall, where the rock came down to ankle height beside the paved channel of the path, and he looked at Jakobus rather than the wall, which was the thing that told Jakobus to look where the hand was. "Here. Down here. Not up there at the pretty colours."

Jakobus crouched.

There was a channel cut into the base of the cliff. A groove, hand-deep, smooth-sided, running level along the foot of the wall at a height that put it about shin-high to a standing man — a clean horizontal incision worked into the living rock, following the line of the gorge, dropping by a fall so slight you'd never see it with the eye. Only the water would know. It ran on ahead and disappeared around the curve. On the far wall, low down, there was another, twin to it.

"Two," Jakobus said.

“Two.” Sami crouched beside him. “One each side. And once, ceramic pipe sitting in this one — segments, this long—” he held his hands a forearm apart “—pushed one into the next, the joint sealed. Some of it still in the museum. Clean water down one side, from the spring, Ain Mousa, all the way up the valley. The other side—” he flicked two fingers at the open paved channel down the middle of the path, where now there was nothing but dust and donkey “—the other side and the floor, that was for the flood.”

“This is a riverbed.”

“This was a river when the rain came. Once a year, maybe. Maybe less. And when it came it came like the hand of God down a slot three metres wide.” Sami stood, knees clicking, and Jakobus stood with him. “You know what a flash flood does in a place like this. Wall of water, no warning, full of stone. It would kill everyone in here. It has — there were tourists, before they built the dam back. Twenty, more. In an hour.”

Jakobus looked up the corridor, at the leaning walls, at the strip of pale sky, at the two hundred soft people moving down a stone throat that had filled with killing water once a year for the whole of its history.

“So they moved the river,” he said.

Sami looked at him then, and something in the looking changed — the way a man looks when he’s said a thing to a hundred faces and finally watched it land in one. “They moved the river. Up there, before the Siq, a dam — they cut a tunnel through the rock, a hundred metres, and sent the wadi the other way, around. So the gorge stays dry. So the city lives. So the pipe—” he toed the channel “—brings sweet water down without the flood ever touching it. Same gorge. One side death, one side drink. They sorted them.”

“Who told you twenty?”

“My grandfather pointed where the bodies came out. Nineteen sixty-three. Before they fixed the old dam again.” Sami started walking. “That’s why I bring the engineer first to the water, *ya zalameh*. Everyone else wants the dead kings’ doors. I think a man like you would rather see the thing that kept people alive.”

Jakobus didn’t answer. He was looking at the tool-marks.

You had to want to see them. Most of the wall was weathered smooth, scoured by two thousand years of grit and wind and the brush of a million hands. But in the channel, sheltered, low, where the water had run and nothing else had — there, the rock still held the bite of the iron. Short straight strokes, angled, overlapping, the chisel walked along by a man who knew exactly how deep he was allowed to go and went no deeper. Patient, level, true. Not hacked. *Cut*. The same care a good fitter takes lapping a face flat, the same economy — enough and not one stroke past enough.

He put his own fingers into the channel. The stone was cold and dry and smooth under the strokes. Somebody had knelt here, in this same dark, with the same cold off the same rock, and made this, by hand, so that a city he would never see could drink. Something in Jakobus's chest did the thing it had done once before, years ago, with his palm flat in the tool-marks of an obelisk that cracked and was left where it lay. Sat down. Stopped arguing.

"Jakobus." Lena's voice came back down the corridor, sharpened by the rock into a blade. She was at the curve, the camera down at her side for once, the impatience visible from forty metres. "I'm losing the light at the exit. They open the slot and the sun's on the façade for twenty minutes and then it's flat all day. Are you coming, or are you going to feel the wall."

"Coming."

He didn't move yet. He took his fingers out of the channel slowly, the way you take your hand off a sleeping animal.

Sami was watching him with the small private patience of a man who has spent his life waiting for outsiders to be quiet enough to be told something. "You see it," he said. It wasn't a question.

"I see it."

"The colours, they take the picture. This—" Sami tapped the channel with the toe of his sandal one last time "—this is why there was anyone here to carve the colours."

They walked. The corridor bent and bent again, the walls breathing cold, the crowd thickening as the slot pinched tighter — three metres now, two and a half, everyone's shoulders nearly touching, the sound of all of them folded together into one low river of murmur

and footfall under the leaning rock. Up ahead the light was changing — a brightness at the end of the dark, warm where everything had been grey, and the crowd felt it and pressed toward it the way crowds always press toward an exit, a pressure with no malice in it and no brakes either.

Through the narrowing slot, framed by the last few metres of rose-purple stone, Jakobus saw it for the first time: a vertical sliver of carved façade, gold in the early sun, a single fluted column and the edge of a pediment, impossibly precise, hanging in the slot of dark like a thing seen through a barely-open door. The Khazneh. The Treasury that wasn't.

The crowd behind him surged a half-step. A bus-load had come down fast and they were all reaching the gold sliver at once, two hundred people wanting the same twenty minutes of light on the same forty metres of stone, and the slot would not let more than a few through abreast.

"Stay together," Jakobus said — quietly, the way he said everything, pitched to reach Sami and Lena and no one else, his hand finding the small of Lena's pack to steady her against the press without her quite noticing it was there. The slot of light pulled at all of them.

He went toward it with the rest. But the thing he carried out of the dark wasn't the gold face waiting at the end.

It was the cold channel, and the marks of the iron, and a man on his knees making a city possible one careful stroke at a time.

Chapter 3 — The Treasury: Face, Not Fortune

The Siq ends the way a held breath ends. One moment the gorge had them in its narrow dark, the rose walls leaning close enough to touch on both sides at once, the air cool and old; the next the rock split and let in a slot of furious morning light, and at the bottom of that slot, framed like a thing you were meant to find, stood the Khazneh.

Jakobus stopped. He had not meant to. Forty years of training a man to be unremarkable, and the body stopped anyway, the way the body stops at the edge of a high place. The façade burned in the early sun — columns and pediment and the great urn at the top, gold where the light hit and shadow-purple where it didn't, two hundred feet of carved sandstone hung against a wall of carved sandstone, the most decorated thing in a desert that decorated nothing.

“There it is,” Sami said beside him, dry. “The reason they came. Then the water, then the dead. But the picture first, always the picture.”

The plaza filled and emptied and filled. Tour groups poured out of the Siq behind them and clotted at the open ground, phones up like a field of small bright leaves turning to the sun. A man with a lanyard was telling a half-circle of pink-shouldered visitors that the urn at the top was solid gold, that the Bedouin had fired rifles at it for a century trying to crack it open and spill the pharaoh's hoard, and look — he pointed — look at the bullet marks. The visitors looked. The visitors believed. A camel knelt in the dust with a saddle the colour of a flag, and a boy beside it chanted *one photo, my friend, very cheap*.

Lena was already gone from them, threading the crowd at a crouch, the long lens up. “The light's wrong in twenty minutes,” she said

over her shoulder, not to anyone. “I need it before the sun comes off the top.” She found her spot — a clear yard of dust between a German family and a donkey — and went still behind the camera the way Jakobus went still behind the wheel: the same total presence, pointed at a different god.

He let her go. She would get her shot or she wouldn’t, and either way the façade would be there, which was the whole genius of the thing.

“They are telling them about the gold,” Sami said. He had come to stand at Jakobus’s shoulder, hands loose, watching the lanyard man work the crowd. There was no heat in it. He had watched this a thousand mornings. “Every day, the gold. There is no gold. There was never gold. You see the marks?” He lifted his chin at the pocked stone of the urn, the chips and craters worn soft by time. “Real. They shot at it. For nothing. The story was already wrong when they loaded the rifle.”

“What is it, then.” Not a challenge. He wanted the answer the way he wanted any honest answer — to put down the wrong one he was already, he noticed, half in love with. A treasury. A door into a hill packed with the spoils of the incense road, frankincense traded up into stone and gold, a king’s last clever joke. He had been carrying that picture since the Siq, had let it grow in the dark, and he could feel it now wanting to be true.

“A tomb.” Sami said it plainly, the way you tell a man the price of a thing. “A face for a dead king. You go in—” he nodded at the dark rectangle of the doorway, low between the columns, “—and it is a room. Square. Empty. A chamber, a few side rooms cut for the bodies. Nothing on the walls. No stairs going down to anything. The whole of it is the front. They put everything into the face and nothing behind it, because the face was the point. The dead don’t need a room. The living need to look up.”

Jakobus looked up.

He felt the picture go — the packed hill, the king’s joke, the gold — felt it leave him with a small private regret he was not ashamed of. He’d wanted it. A man who reads made things for a living is allowed, now and then, to want the made thing to be more than it is. The wanting was the human part. He set it down.

“Right,” he said.

That was all. Sami glanced at him sideways, and something in the guide’s shoulders eased a fraction — not surprise, exactly, but the small relief of a man who has handed a stranger a less beautiful truth and watched him take it without argument. Most of them argued. Most of them wanted the gold so badly they would rather be wrong with the lanyard man than right with the one who lived here.

Jakobus had wanted it too. The difference was only that he’d rather be right.

He moved closer, against the drift of the crowd, until he was near enough to read the stone the way he read everything — by what it had cost, by the marks the hands had left. Up close the magnificence broke down into work. The columns were not perfect; one capital sat a half-degree off its neighbour, a thing no camera at this distance would ever catch. The carving had gone top-down — he could see it in the weathering, the upper register sharp under its overhang, sheltered, the lines still clean two thousand years on; the lower courses softer, eaten by the wind and the rare hard rain the Siq above them had been built to survive. They’d cut from the top. Scaffold, or a cut-back ledge they stood on and worked off, chiselling away beneath their own feet as they descended, so that the last thing carved was the ground they finally stood on. You couldn’t fix a mistake at the top once you were below it. Every line up there had been final the moment it was made.

He put a hand flat against the lowest course, in the worn place where ten thousand other hands had been, and felt the tool-marks under his palm — not behind glass, not roped off, the actual strokes, the rhythm of a man with a point and a mallet finding the angle that lets sandstone come away clean. He stood like that a moment longer than a tourist would. Sami did not hurry him.

“No defences,” Jakobus said, half to himself.

“What?”

“There’s nothing here built to be held.” He took his hand off the stone. “No wall, no gate you could bar, no place to put men with the high ground over the door. If this were a treasury — a real one, full of gold — you’d build it to keep someone out. You’d cut firing slots. You’d

make the approach a killing ground.” He nodded back at the Siq, the throat they’d come through. “You’d make *that* a killing ground. It already is one, near enough — three metres wide, two hundred high — and nobody put a single defensive cut in it. They built it to move water and people, not to stop an army.” He let the rest sit unsaid: *because there was nothing here to steal. The wealth was already spent. It went into the face.*

Sami was quiet a second. When he spoke there was a different weight in it. “You see that fast.”

“It’s what I look at.” He didn’t elaborate. The crowd surged behind them — a new group out of the Siq, a guide’s voice rising, *and now, the Treasury, where the pharaoh hid his gold* — and the press of bodies nudged them both a half-step forward, the camels shifting, the boy’s *one photo* going up an octave, somebody’s child crying in the heat.

There was no holding the spot. There never was; the plaza was a tide that came up the gorge every few minutes and would not be argued with. Jakobus felt it the way he felt all crowds-with-one-exit — a small old pressure at the base of the skull, the count starting behind his eyes — and he breathed it flat, the way you breathe everything flat, and let the tide carry them toward the cliff of tombs to the east.

He found Lena coming the other way, the lens capped, her face doing the particular thing a face does when it has got the shot and is already gone to the next one. “I got it,” she said. “Top light, no heads in the bottom of the frame. The gold thing—” she tipped her head at the lanyard man, “—is good colour. People love the gold thing.”

“There’s no gold,” Jakobus said.

“I know there’s no gold.” She was already walking. “The story’s the picture. Nobody’s buying the tool-marks.”

Sami caught Jakobus’s eye over her departing shoulder. Neither said anything. It was a whole conversation in a half-second — the guide who’d spent his life on this ground and the fixer who read made things, both watching the back of a woman walk away with the most beautiful wrong thing in the place, because the wrong thing was the one that sold. There was no malice in it. Lena was good at her work, and her work was the legend. But the look that passed between the two men was the kind you only share with someone who has also

stood at a wonder and watched the crowd photograph the lie in front of it.

It was the first time Jakobus had looked at Sami and seen, plainly, the same thing he carried himself — and felt the small, surprising comfort of not being the only one in the plaza who'd rather be right than dazzled.

“Come,” Sami said. “The dead are this way. And then—” the ghost of something, almost a smile, “—then I show you where the rain was kept. That, nobody photographs.”

Jakobus settled the shades down against the climbing sun, and followed him out of the gold and into the work.

Chapter 4 — The Cistern and the Pipe

Sami did not take the path the others took. Where the colonnaded street opened ahead and the crowd flowed toward it like water finding the lowest line, he turned left, off the worn track and onto a goat path that climbed a slope of broken rock toward a fence and a tin-roofed shed the colour of nothing.

“Where are you taking us,” Lena said. It wasn’t a question. She had her camera up against her chest, two fingers riding the dial, looking back over her shoulder at the city centre and the light on it.

“To the part that worked,” Sami said.

There was a gate in the fence, and beside it a man in a faded uniform shirt on a plastic chair, a radio crackling on the ground at his feet. He stood when he saw them. Not fast. The way a man stands who has stood for a thousand people he was going to turn around.

Jakobus took the shades off before the man’s hand reached his belt. He folded them once and hung them in the open neck of his shirt and let the man see his eyes in the flat morning light, and he reached into the waistcoat — slow, both of them watching the hand — and brought out the papers Tariq had pressed on him in Amman, the survey letter with the Department stamp, and held them out the right way round so the man wouldn’t have to turn them.

Sami spoke first, fast and low, and the dialect of it surprised the guard — Jakobus saw it land, the small softening at the corner of the mouth. Jakobus added his own three words in the same wrong-for-a-textbook turn he’d learned from a man on a different desert twenty

years gone. *Sabah el-kheir. Mashghuleen?* — a workman's good-morning, *you busy?* The guard looked at him properly then, the way you look at a sentence that came out of the wrong face.

He waved them through. He didn't keep the papers.

"He likes you," Lena said, in English, when the gate had shut behind them.

"He likes that I'm boring."

The shed wasn't the thing. The shed was where the thing went to be looked at. Behind it the slope had been cut away — old, the cut older than the shed by two thousand years, the new corrugated roof bolted over part of it to keep the rain off something built to catch rain. Jakobus saw the irony of that and let it go.

A cistern lay below them, rock-cut, big as a swimming bath and deeper, the floor of it dry now and skinned with dust, the walls going down into shadow. And along the lip, where the slope met the cut, ran a channel — a groove worked into the living stone, smooth-bottomed, on a fall so slight you'd swear it was level until you laid your eye along it and saw the water it wasn't carrying anymore go downhill in your head.

"Here," Sami said.

Lena looked at it. The light was bad in the cut, flat and grey, nothing in the frame but rock and a fence and a tin roof, and Jakobus watched the want go out of her face and the boredom come in to take the room. She didn't raise the camera. She found a flat stone and sat on it and got out a water bottle and drank, and looked at her phone, and that was the most honest thing she'd done all day.

Jakobus crouched at the channel and put his hand in the groove.

"Dams," Sami said, and pointed up the wadi with his whole arm, the way you point at something you can see and the other man can't. "Up there, across the wash. Not to keep the water. To slow it. When the rain comes it does not fall here like rain, it falls like a wall, all at once, kilometres of it arriving in ten minutes. A wall like that you do not catch. You break it. You make it walk where you tell it. The dams break the wall into water." He brought the arm down, level, along the line of the channel. "Then it is just water, and water you can lead."

“By the slope,” Jakobus said.

“By the slope. By this much.” Sami held up a thumb and finger, a hair apart. “Over a long way. They had no machine to tell them the fall. They had string and patience and a hundred years of being wrong before they were right.”

Jakobus ran his palm along the groove. The bottom of it was worn into a shallow curve, the centre cut deeper than the edges by nothing but the soft drag of water across centuries, the same hand that hollows a doorstep. He’d seen it in mineshaft drains a kilometre down where the air was a furnace. He’d seen it in a stock trough on a farm a long time ago. The same shape. Water doesn’t care whose desert it’s in.

“And before the cistern,” Sami said, “a basin. Small. The water stands in it a little while, and the sand it carries sinks, and the clean water goes on. So the cistern fills with water, not with mud. You do that, your cistern is good for a generation. You do not, and you are digging it out with a bucket every winter until you die of it.”

“Settling basin.” Jakobus stood. His knee told him about the crouch.

“You know the word.”

“I know the thing. The word I’ll forget by lunch.”

Sami laughed — short, surprised into it. “That is the right way round.”

A length of pipe leaned against the shed wall, set on a wooden cradle behind a low rope: a section of fired clay, terracotta gone the colour of old brick, the size of a man’s calf and a hand-span long, one end swelled into a collar, the other drawn down to fit the next. Jakobus stepped over the rope without thinking about it, and Sami didn’t stop him, which was its own small permission.

He turned the segment in his hands. Heavier than it looked, lighter than he expected, and that contradiction told him things — the wall thinner than a careless man would have made it, thin enough to throw on a wheel fast and fire hot and make a thousand of, thin enough to fail if you got it wrong. Inside the collar, a grey skin of old plaster, lime, hard as the clay now, the seal that married one segment to the next. He could see the thumb of whoever had buttered it on, a single drag-mark in the set plaster, the print of a hand that had done this

all day every day until the hand knew the amount without the head.

The pipe wasn't full inside. Round, but it never ran full — a band of mineral pale up one side of the bore and not the other, the high-water mark of two thousand years of part-full flow. Open-channel. Run a pipe full and under pressure and every weak joint becomes a fountain, every hairline crack a problem you'll never find. Run it half-empty, on the slope, the water *resting* on the bottom of the bore the way it rested in the open groove — and a leak is just a damp patch you mend on a slow Tuesday.

"They could have run it full," Jakobus said. "Sealed it tight, pushed it uphill where they needed to. Pressure. They knew how."

"They knew how. They did not want to." Sami crouched beside him, looked at the pale band in the bore. "You see it."

"They built it to be fixed, not to be perfect."

Sami went quiet a second, the way Jakobus had learned to recognise — a man re-filing the company he was in.

"Yes," he said. "That is it exactly. People think the marvel is that they built it. The marvel is that it ran for four hundred years, and it ran because someone walked the line every season with a bag of lime and a thumb, found the damp patch, pressed it, and went home. The building, anybody can do that once, with enough rope and enough men. The keeping." He set the segment back in the cradle, gentle. "The keeping is the genius. Nobody photographs the keeping."

Behind them a pump was running rough.

Jakobus had heard it since the gate — under everything, the sound a thing makes when it's about to stop being a thing. A modern pump, on the cistern's downhill side, where they fed water now to the staff house and the ranger toilets: a little electric unit on a slab, surging, dying back, surging, the note climbing wrong each time. Two men stood over it. One had the cover off and was looking at the wet inside of it the way you look at a sick animal you've already decided you can't afford to save.

He walked over. He didn't ask. He stood at the right distance and looked, hands behind his back, and one of the men glanced at him, and at Sami, and Sami said one word, and the man stepped half a

pace sideways. Not yes. Just room.

It was nothing. It was almost insulting how much it was nothing. The pump was losing prime — drawing air, the foot of the suction line sat too high in the dropped cistern level, and somebody had tried to fix it by spinning the impeller faster, which was the surge, which was the dying. He could hear the whole of it the way Sami heard the whole of the channel. He crouched. His knee complained again and he ignored it. He got a thumb on the suction union and felt the breath of air pulling past a seal gone hard, traced the line to the cracked priming plug nobody had thought to look at because it wasn't dramatic enough to be the problem, and put his hand back into the waistcoat.

Out came a pry-bar the size of a finger and a fold of plumber's tape he carried for no reason he'd ever say out loud. He killed the pump first — reached past the man and snapped it off, and the surging quit, and the cut went quiet enough to hear the radio at the gate. He backed the plug out, wound the thread, set it, bled the line by hand with the old patience of a man who has primed pumps in places where the pump dying meant something worse than a dry toilet. Topped it from the cistern with a tin the man handed him without being asked — that was the moment, the tin handed over unasked. He switched it on.

It ran. The note came up clean and stayed there, flat, level, the sound of a thing that was going to keep being a thing.

He stood. The two men were looking at him. One said something to the other and they both half-laughed, the laugh of men who'd been about to lose an afternoon and hadn't.

"Shukran," the older one said.

"Afwan." Jakobus wiped his hands on the back of his trousers. The plumber's tape went back in the waistcoat; the pry-bar he turned over once in his fingers and then, on a beat he didn't examine, held out to the younger man, handle first. The kid took it, surprised, looked at it, looked at him.

"You'll lose it before me," Jakobus said, in his bad good Arabic, and the kid grinned.

Sami had watched the whole of it without moving.

“You see,” he said, when Jakobus came back, “now you are not a tourist.” He said it dry, but it wasn’t only dry. “A tourist takes the picture and goes. You fixed the pump.” He looked at the running pump, and the dry cistern, and the worn groove, and the length of pipe in its cradle, all of it the same thing two thousand years apart. “That is what this place has always been. Not the carving. The man who comes back next season with the lime.”

Lena was on her feet. She had the camera in her hands now, looking at the pump, at the two staff and the kid with the pry-bar, at Jakobus’s hands.

“That’s the shot,” she said, half to herself, surprised. And then, lowering the camera: “Nobody buys it.”

“No,” Sami agreed. “Nobody buys it.”

He turned and started up the slope toward the next thing, the one nobody photographed, and Jakobus stood a second longer at the lip of the dry cistern with the clean pump running behind him and the groove going downhill in his head, and then he put the shades back on against the climbing sun and went after him.

Chapter 5 — The Royal Tombs: Promises in Stone

The pump held. Jakobus wiped his hands on the back of his trousers, left the staff house with the small clean ache of a thing put right behind him, and followed Sami back along the cliff base where the morning was burning off the cool.

The Street of Facades ran east, the rock went up in tiers, and the tombs began.

He had seen the Khazneh. He had let it argue him out of the gold and been grateful for the loss. But the Royal Tombs were not one face. They were a row of them, a parade of dead men's fronts cut side by side into the high cliff, each one a different argument with the same stone — and the sun came over the rim now, low and hard, and the rose went orange and the orange went gold, and the whole wall of them lit at once, like a thing waking.

Lena's camera came up on its own. She didn't say anything. He liked her better for the few seconds she forgot to be bored.

"Urn Tomb," Sami said, walking. He pointed without slowing — a flat hand, the gesture of a man who had pointed at it ten thousand times and still meant it. "Big court in front. The Byzantines made it a church later. You see the colonnade they built under it? The Nabataeans cut the tomb. Someone else cut the floor to stand it on." A small dry sound. "Everyone uses everyone's house, in the end."

They came up under it. The court was a flat shelf hacked from the slope, the façade behind it four storeys if it was one, the columns half-engaged in the rock so they read as columns and were really the

cliff pretending. Jakobus put his hand flat on a pillar that wasn't a pillar. Warm already. The grain ran through it diagonal, dark bands and pale, iron laid down by a sea gone longer than there had been anyone to carve it.

He stood there a while and did the arithmetic he always did.

Not the romance of it. The work of it. A man up on a scaffold with an iron point and a wooden mallet, top down — you always cut a façade top down, so the spoil falls clear of what's finished — and below him another man, and below him another, the whole face coming off the cliff in chips the size of a thumbnail, season after season, the dust in their lungs, the water hauled up so they could drink and so the cut wouldn't smoke. Years. A tomb like this was years of paid men. And the men were paid because the family that ordered it had the incense road in its fist — frankincense, myrrh, bitumen out of the Dead Sea — caravans coming in off the desert to be taxed and watered and sent on, and the tax and the water and the road turning, eventually, into this: a face on a cliff that said *we were here, and we could afford forever.*

That was the whole of it. Wealth made into the one thing you couldn't carry off or spend. Trade turned into permanence. They had cut a promise into the rock because the rock was the only thing in this country that didn't move when the rain failed.

"You're doing the sums," Sami said. He had stopped a pace off, watching him the way he'd watched at the cistern.

"Always doing the sums."

"And?"

Jakobus took his hand off the false column. "And it cost more than gold ever could. Gold you find and spend. This you have to *make*. Year on year. With men who have to eat every one of those years." He looked up the face of it, to the empty black mouth of the doorway at the top of the stair. "That's a richer thing to brag with than treasure. Treasure's luck. This is patience you could afford."

Sami didn't answer. But the corner of his mouth went, the way it had gone when Jakobus put the pump back together, and that was answer enough.

They moved along. Silk Tomb — the stone in its face ran wild, ribbons of red and blue-grey and ochre swirled through the cut like something poured and frozen, and even Lena gave it a full minute. Corinthian Tomb, half the Khazneh's design done coarser, an echo of the famous one made by a hand that had seen it and reached. Then the Palace Tomb, widest of all, the façade running so far across the cliff they'd had to build the top storey in cut blocks because they ran out of rock to dig into — a wall pretending to be a cliff pretending to be a wall.

The sun was over the rim fully now, and the shelf in front of the tombs had no shade on it at all.

He felt the heat change. Not the dry early warmth — the other thing, the still weight of it coming down off the rock and up off the stone underfoot at once, the air gone heavy and motionless the way it did before noon in a place with no wind. The waistcoat sat heavy on his shoulders. He drank from the bottle on his hip, deliberately, the way you pay a tax, and found the strip of shadow under the Palace Tomb's overhang, and put his back to it, and watched the others, and counted the minutes he'd let himself want to be out here.

Lena was fading.

She'd stopped lifting the camera. She had it slung now, both hands hanging, her face gone the particular slack pink of a fair-skinned person in a sun their body had never agreed to. She found a cut step at the base of the Corinthian Tomb and sat down on it hard, elbows on her knees.

"Drink," he said. Not a suggestion.

She drank.

He was watching her — half watching, the rest of him on the slow scan of the shelf he ran everywhere — when the man went down forty metres off.

A tour group, the standard kind, lanyards and sun hats and a guide with a furled umbrella held up as a flag. One of the older ones, a big soft man gone grey, the kind who carried his weight in front the way Jakobus carried his own, except this one had walked the Siq and the shelf and the heat on a heart that hadn't been asked to do that in twenty years. He didn't stagger. That was the thing people got wrong about it. He just sat down where there was nothing to sit on,

slow, like a building deciding, and then he was on the stone and his wife was making a sound.

Jakobus was already moving. The heat went out of his accounting the way weather goes out of a room.

He came in low and easy, hands open, voice flat and dropping under the noise. "Okay. Okay. I've got him. Step back, give him air — back, that's it." The wife's hands found his arm; he didn't shake them off, just turned his shoulder so she was beside him, not in front. Down on one knee — the bad one barked; he ignored it — fingers to the throat, the carotid, found it. Fast and thready but there. Skin hot and wet. Breathing.

"Sir. Sir, can you hear me." A squeeze on the shoulder, firm. The man's eyes came up muddy and found his.

"Hot," the man said. "Bit hot."

"Ja. You overcooked. Nothing dramatic." He had the man's hat off, was already reaching back without looking — "Sami. Water. And whatever shade we can rig" — and the bottle came into his hand before he'd finished asking, Sami opening the guide's furled umbrella over the two of them, and the staff coming on at a run from down the shelf. He slung the man's arm over his own knee and got him propped half-up against his thigh so the head wasn't flat. The hanky was out and soaked before he'd thought about it, the clean square of cotton going round the back of the neck, the evaporation pulling at the heat where it counted, where the big vessels ran close.

"Small sips," he told the wife, putting the bottle in her hands, giving her the job because a person with a job stops drowning. "Not gulps. There. Talk to him. He likes hearing you."

He stayed down there in the umbrella-shade with the stranger's heat coming off him, watching the colour climb back into the lips by degrees, the breathing slow, until the man went embarrassed — which was the best sign there was; a man gone sheepish is a man whose blood has come back to his brain. The guide had it from there, had radioed down, had the staff arriving with a chair. Jakobus eased the man's weight off his knee and onto a folded jacket and stood, slow, and the knee told him about it, and he let it.

"You're a doctor," the wife said.

“No.” He picked up the man’s hat, knocked the dust off it, set it on the man’s chest where he could reach it. “Just been hot before.”

He went back to his strip of shade. Sami was there. Sami said nothing for a while, and then, quietly, in the flat voice of a man stating a price: “A tourist takes the picture and walks past the man on the ground.” He let it sit. “You walk to the man on the ground.”

Jakobus drank his water and didn’t answer that one either. Some things you don’t say back to.

The crowd had thinned while it happened — the heat doing it, the morning buses already cycling people out, the shelf emptier than it had been an hour before. And empty, the tombs were worse, somehow. Bigger. With nobody under them clicking phones and complaining about the sun, they were just the great blind faces again, looking out over a valley the trade had left, the road moved, the caravans two thousand years gone. Built to last. They had lasted. The men who paid for them were dust you couldn’t sift from the ordinary dust, and the houses they’d had carved for that dust stood up in the cliff exactly as ordered — perfect, kept, *forever* — for nobody. The promise cut and the thing it promised gone out from under it like water out of a broken pipe.

He stood and looked up at the Palace Tomb’s false top storey, the blocks a man had stacked because the cliff ran out, and the heat pressed down, and a thing he didn’t reach for reached up anyway.

His father had wanted permanence. The man had built a house on the farm that would outlast everything — overbuilt it, double-coursed the walls, footings you could’ve stood a silo on, *this’ll be standing when we’re all gone*. He’d been right. It was standing. It had outlasted the marriage and the man and most of what had happened inside it, and Jakobus had not been back to see it standing and did not intend to. A thing built to last keeps no account of what it was built around. It just stands, indifferent, like the tomb, like the wall, holding its shape over an emptiness it can’t feel and can’t help.

Built to last. Ja. He knew exactly what that cost, and it wasn’t the carving.

He turned from the face. Drank the last of his water and felt the heat in it now, warm against his teeth, the hessian bag a long way down

at the Beast.

“Lena,” he said.

She lifted her head off her arms. Cooked, but steady. She’d be all right.

“We move while she can still walk,” Sami said, low, and tipped his chin up the valley, past the tombs, to where the path climbed out of sight into the rock and kept climbing. “Monastery’s up there. Eight hundred and fifty steps, near enough. And the light won’t wait for her knees or yours.”

Jakobus looked at the steps going up into the white glare, and felt his own knee, quietly, take note.

“Right,” he said. “Then we don’t sit.”

Chapter 6 — The Monastery Climb

Sami started up the rock stairs without a word, and Jakobus understood at once that the silence was the lesson.

The pace looked lazy. It was not. It was the pace of a man who had done this a thousand times and buried, somewhere in his calves, the exact ration of effort the climb would take, and meant to spend not one coin more. He did not stop for the view. He did not point at the goats. He put one sandal in front of the other up the cut steps with the unhurried economy of a man walking to his own kitchen, and Jakobus, falling in behind, recognised a discipline he respected the way he respected a clean kill: no waste in it. The body kept for the work.

The heat had got up off the wadi floor and was leaning on them now. Not the white furnace of midday — they'd had the wit to start before that — but the steady tax of late morning, the sun on the back of the neck, the rock throwing its own stored warmth back up into the face. Jakobus felt it the way he always felt real heat: as the one thing his body had no answer for. He could run cold all night with bare arms and bank a fire in his chest that other men envied. He could not switch the ceiling off. So he did the only thing the years had taught him — drank, went quiet, kept his eyes off the top of the stairs, because counting the top of the stairs was how a man broke himself.

Lena had brought everything. He'd watched her load the day-pack at the guesthouse and said nothing, because she was a professional and it was her kit, and the one thing worse than a tourist who packed wrong was an old man who told her so. Two bodies, the long lens, the

spare batteries in their padded sleeves, the tripod strapped diagonal across the bag like a rifle. The water. She'd taken extra because of the tombs, which was right, and now the water was a punishment, which was also right: you carried it up so you didn't die, and the carrying nearly did the job the dying would have.

By the first long flight she was breathing through her mouth.

He gave it two more switchbacks — partly to be sure, partly because she would not have let him near it any sooner. Then, on a wide step where the trail doubled back and a Bedouin boy sat watching three donkeys do nothing, Jakobus stopped, turned, and held out a hand.

"The big one."

"I'm fine."

"I know. The big one."

She looked at him with the particular irritation of a person who knew she was being managed and could not afford to refuse the management. Then she swung the heavy bag off her shoulders and gave it over, and the relief crossed her face before she could stop it, and she hated that he'd seen it, and he gave her the small mercy of looking away while she fixed the lighter pack on her back.

He shouldered the heavy one. A real load. The tripod alone was the better part of three kilos, and the rest pulled at the seams the way good kit always did — every gram earning its place, which he approved of even as it dragged on him. He settled the straps, snugged the chest clip, started up again.

The boy called something to Sami in Arabic, fast and laughing, and Sami called it back over his shoulder, and the boy laughed harder.

"He says," Sami told them, not slowing, "the foreigners pay the donkey to carry them and pay the camera to carry the donkey. He has not decided which of you is the donkey."

"Tell him it's me," Jakobus said. "I volunteered."

Sami's shoulders moved. "He likes you. He says a man who carries his own woman's bag is either very rich or very stupid, and you do not look rich."

"He's a clever boy."

“He is a terrible boy. His father is my cousin.” Sami went on up, and after a moment, drier: “The donkeys are the real climbers. Eight hundred and fifty steps, four times a day, in summer. A donkey does not care about the Monastery. A donkey thinks the Monastery is a place where the carrying stops. This is the correct view.”

Jakobus laughed once, short, and the laugh cost him breath he didn’t have, and he paid for it on the next flight.

The climb began, in earnest, to take him apart.

It came on the way it always came on now — without drama, without mercy. The knee first: the right one, the one that had been talking to him since he’d gone down on the rock by the cistern, that had grumbled all through the tombs and now, with the heavy bag driving down through every step, stopped grumbling and started a flat, bright, businesslike ache, the kind that did not get better, only managed. He shortened his stride on that leg. Let the good leg do more. He breathed the climb into a count — not the music’s count, there was no music here, just the bass of his own pulse, but the same trick, the heart set to a thing that did not change — and pulled the rate down off the panic line and held it there, one step to the beat, the beat going on forever.

His lungs were the other thing. He’d been a fit man and was now a durable one, and there was a difference, and the difference was exactly this: the durable man could go all day at the pace the body would still pay for, but ask it for *more* than that — ask it to climb hard in heat with a load — and it told you, plainly, in the only voice it had, that it was fifty-seven years old and had been spent a long time ago on things it had never agreed to.

He did not complain. Complaining was for men who thought the world was negotiating. He went up.

Two thirds of the way, where a slab leaned out and made a pocket of shade, a Bedouin woman had a tea stand. A fire of dry brush in a blackened tin, a kettle gone the colour of the rock, a row of glasses on a board, a hand-lettered sign offering water at a price that was robbery and was also exactly correct, because she had carried every bit of it up the same eight hundred and fifty steps that were killing him.

Sami stopped. Of course Sami stopped. You did not pass a fire.

He greeted her — not the flat tourist *salaam* but the long courteous back-and-forth, the asking after the family and the heat and the slowness of the season, the swallowed consonants of the local tongue that Jakobus could follow about half of and admire all of. There was a negotiation in it somewhere, conducted so gently you'd have missed it, about the price of three bottles and a glass of tea, and it ended with both of them satisfied, which meant the woman had won and Sami had let her and both of them knew it and that was the deal.

Jakobus paid. He had the money out before Sami's hand could move, small notes counted into the woman's palm with a nod and the few words of her own language he'd kept ready — *enough to show he knew whose mountain it was*. She took them and looked at him a half-second longer than the transaction needed, the way locals did when a stranger's accent came out borrowed-into instead of studied-up, and something in her face eased, and she pressed a fourth bottle on him he hadn't bought.

Lena was already shooting. She'd got the long lens up and was working the woman against the fire, the kettle, the rock — and to her credit she did it the right way, caught the eye, asked with her face, waited for the nod. The vendor gave it and went on with her tea, unbothered, a woman who had been photographed ten thousand times and decided a long time ago it cost her nothing.

Jakobus drank his bottle straight down and started on the woman's gift more slowly, and felt the cold of it go into him like sense returning.

"You are grey," Sami observed, mild, over the rim of his glass.

"I'm always grey. It's the beard."

"You are grey *under* the beard." Sami considered him without unkindness. "We can go down. The Monastery will be here tomorrow. It has been here a long time."

"I didn't come up two thirds of a mountain to look at the last third."

Sami inclined his head, conceding the logic of a stubbornness he plainly shared, finished his tea, and stood.

The last flights were the worst because they were nearly the last, and the body, sensing the end, started bargaining — *surely we can stop*,

surely this is enough — and the bargaining was the dangerous part, the part that left men sitting on a step at altitude going cold in their own sweat. He didn't bargain. He went up. The knee screamed and he let it scream and put it down again. The bag pulled and he leaned into the pull. Somewhere in there the count fell away and there was only the next step, and then the next, which was, he had found, the entire secret of every hard thing he had ever done: not the summit, not the strength, just the next step taken without asking whether you had the one after it.

Vasbyt, he told himself, head down. The old word. Bite down.

Then the steps ran out, and the trail opened onto a wide stone court, and he came up into the wind off the high desert and stopped, and forgot, for a moment, that he had a body at all.

Ad-Deir stood across the court.

He had thought, after the Khazneh, that he was inoculated against the façades — that he'd had the lesson, the wonder corrected, the romance traded for the truth, and could meet the next one with the cool of a man who knew it was only a face. He was wrong. It was bigger than the Treasury, and where the Treasury had been delicate, fitted into its slot of canyon like a jewel in a setting, this thing was simply *huge* — a wall of carved sandstone forty-seven metres up, columns and a great urn and a doorway you could have driven the Beast through twice over, the whole of it the colour of dried blood and old gold, glowing where the high sun caught it.

And it was empty.

He walked toward it across the court with Lena's bag still on his back and his knee on fire and his lungs ragged, went up the worn step and in through the great doorway, and inside there was — nothing. A single chamber, square, plain, dressed rock, cool after the court, smelling of dust and stone and the goats that sheltered here in storms. No tomb. No altar. No room behind the room. The wind found the doorway and made a low note in it, a single sustained tone, the mountain breathing.

All that face. All those eight hundred and fifty steps and the woman's fire and the donkeys four times a day and the men who had hung off this cliff on ropes with iron and cut a wall the size of a cathedral out

of the living rock — for a single empty room and a door that looked out over the whole bone-white country.

He stood in the emptiness and let the wind sing in the doorway, and he understood the thing the way he'd understood it at the tombs, but bigger, because everything here was bigger: they had not built this to be entered. They had built it to be *climbed to*. The labour was the prayer. The emptiness was the point. You did not haul yourself up eight hundred and fifty steps to find treasure inside; you hauled yourself up so that, having paid, you could stand in front of the made thing with your body honest and your bravado gone, knowing exactly what it had cost to be here, and look up.

He was diminished. He could feel it in his knee and his lungs and the grey under his beard — a fifty-seven-year-old man who had carried another person's bag up a mountain and very nearly hadn't. And he was, in the same breath, undone by the scale of it, by the patience it had taken, by the people who had decided that the only fit answer to a desert that killed everything was to cut something this size that the desert could not move.

Sami came and stood beside him in the doorway, looking out, not in.

"You see," Sami said, quiet, into the wind. "Nothing inside."

"No."

"This disappoints the tourists. They think they climbed for a room." He paused. "They climbed for the climb."

Jakobus said nothing. He set Lena's bag down against the cool wall, carefully, and straightened with both hands on the small of his back, and felt his spine click. Far below — small, dust-grey, faithful, waiting where the steps began — he could not see the Beast, but he knew exactly where it sat, and knew the descent was still to come.

He drank the last of the woman's water and looked at the long way down he had not yet paid for, and he was glad, in the gone-quiet, aching way of a man who has nothing left to prove and proved it anyway, that he had come up.

Chapter 7 — The Largest Façade: Emptiness Inside

The plateau levelled and the wind found them.

It came across the open rock in long pushes, dry and steady — the kind of wind that has nowhere to gather and so just keeps coming. Jakobus stood in it and let his lungs settle. Below and behind, the city was gone, folded down into its own gorges, hidden the way the Nabataeans hid everything that mattered. Up here there was sky, and goat-cropped scrub, and the great carved face of Ad-Deir cut into the cliff like something the mountain had been arguing with for two thousand years.

It was bigger than the Treasury. He had read the number — forty-seven metres — and the number had meant nothing on the page. Standing under it, the number was a joke. The lower order of columns stood taller than a house. The urn at the crown, the one the postcards never gave you the scale of, would have taken three men to encircle.

“Walk it with me,” Sami said. He did not look at the façade. He was looking at the ground, the worn paths, the way the plateau drained. “She will shoot for an hour. The light moves on it now.”

Lena had already gone wide, working back across the open rock for a frame that held the whole of it, her good knee taking the weight, the bad one stiff. She crouched, stood, moved three paces left, crouched again. Jakobus watched her work the angle and caught the moment she gave up on the wide shot and went tight instead — chasing the cut lines, the tool-grooves, the places where the carvers had run out of cliff and made do.

He fell in beside Sami and they walked the perimeter, slow, his knee announcing each step and him paying it no mind out loud.

“You see it drains away from the face,” Sami said, pointing his chin at a shallow channel worked into the rock, almost invisible, running off toward the cliff edge. “They cut the water off the high ground so it would not sit against the stone. Everywhere. Even here. Even for a thing nobody lived in.”

“They didn’t trust the rain anywhere.”

“They did not trust anything they could not cut a channel for.” Sami almost smiled. “This is why they lasted. Not the carving. The not-trusting.”

They came around the shoulder of the cliff and the wind dropped behind the rock and the heat came back at once, radiating off the sandstone, a stillness in the lee that the rest of the plateau didn’t have. Jakobus put his hand flat on the stone. Warm as a flank. He left it there a moment, the way he’d left his hand in the obelisk marks at Aswan years ago, the way he could not help leaving his hand on made things — and felt nothing under his palm but the labour of it. The patience. The chisel’s ten thousand small certainties.

“What’s it for,” he said. Not a question, exactly. The thing he always asked.

Sami had heard him ask it three days running and had stopped pretending it annoyed him.

“A tomb.” He shrugged one shoulder. “Maybe. A meeting place — *biclinium*, for the feasts of the dead. Inscriptions speak of a god, of gatherings. There are crosses cut later, when the monks came, so — *Deir*, the monastery; that name is theirs, not the builders’. The builders left no plaque.” He spread his hands, palm up, the gesture taking in the whole forty-seven metres. “We get to be clever about it forever.”

“And inside?”

“Inside,” Sami said, “is nothing. Come.”

The doorway was up a worn lip of rock, and Jakobus took it carefully,

both hands and a grunt he didn't bother to hide. Then he was through, and out of the wind, and the temperature fell off a cliff of its own.

The chamber was cool. Properly cool, the cool of deep stone the sun never reaches, and after the furnace of the plateau it went over him like water. He stood just inside the threshold, let his eyes adjust, felt the sweat on his back turn cold and good.

One room. That was the whole of it.

He had braced, without admitting it, for the thing the body always braces for — that behind the largest face ever cut in this country there would be a *reason*: a vault, a sanctuary, some interior to match the promise of the front. There was a single squared chamber, perhaps twelve metres a side, the ceiling lost in dimness, a low platform at the back where the rock had been left standing — an altar, a bench, a place to lay something or someone, you couldn't know. Tool marks on every wall. No paint left, or none he could see. No carving inside worth the name. The carvers had spent everything they had on the outside and walked away from the inside the moment it was hollow enough.

The wind came in behind him and went around the room and made a sound.

A low sound, almost not a sound — a pressure, a tone the chamber found in the moving air and held. It rose when the gust outside rose and fell when it fell, and in the gaps it left a silence so complete he could hear the blood in his own ears. He stood in the middle of the floor where the platform faced the door and listened to a building breathe, and the emptiness of it was not absence. It was a kind of fullness. It rang.

He thought, without wanting to: *they built a throat and put nothing in it to say.*

He thought about the Royal Tombs, the cliff of façades, trade turned into permanence — a man's whole fortune spent making sure the rock remembered his name after the name itself was sanded off the lintel. He thought about the word Sami kept circling — *the keeping* — and how everything here was about catching a thing before it ran away, the rain, the dead, the meaning. And here at the top, the biggest catch of all, and the net was empty. Forty-seven metres of intention

and a cold room and the wind doing the only talking that ever got done.

It did not make him sad in the way a man means when he says sad. It made him quiet the way the inside of the Pyramid had made him quiet, twenty years ago — something in him sitting down and stopping its argument. Except this time what it sat down with was not wonder. It was the plain fact, arrived at last, that you can build a thing to outlast its purpose, and it will, and the outlasting is not the same as the meaning. The purpose goes. The face stays. The face stays and stays and stops being *for* anything and just *is* — enormous, cool, full of weather — and people climb eight hundred and fifty steps to stand inside the not-being-for-anything and feel something they can't name and go back down again.

His father had built things to last too. A man like that, all hardness and held breath, raising a house and a name and a reputation in a grain-silo dorp so the thing would stand after the man was gone. It had stood. The man had gone — by his own hand, in the end, the way some men cut their own water off — and the house had stood, and the standing had meant nothing at all, except to the boy who'd had to live in the emptiness inside it.

Jakobus took his shades off, here in the dark where he didn't need them, and folded them, and held them. There was no one to be bare-eyed *for*. He just wanted the room with nothing between him and it.

Lena came in.

He heard her before he saw her — the small sounds of her gear, a soft swear in German as her eyes failed in the dark the way his had. Then she was beside him, lifting the camera, and he watched her try to take the room.

She couldn't. He could see her finding that out. She framed the back platform and there was nothing in the frame to give it size — no door, no figure, just grey-brown rock and grey-brown rock, the scale that pressed on the body simply not there for the lens. She moved. She tried the doorway with the bright plateau behind it, a slot of white, and the white blew out and the dark went to nothing and the chamber

became a black smear with a hole in it. She tried Jakobus standing in it, for the measure of a man, and he stood and let her, and even that didn't do it; a man in a room is just a man in a room.

She lowered the camera.

"It's nothing," she said. Not bitter. Almost laughing, too tired to be anything else. "I climb the whole mountain and the inside is *nothing*. There is no picture in here."

"No," Jakobus agreed.

"The face is the picture."

"The face was always the picture." He put his shades back on, gently, an instrument going away. "They knew that. That's why they only built the face."

She looked at him a moment in the cool dark, the wind finding its tone again over their heads, and he thought she might ask him what he meant. She didn't. She was too far gone for it, and anyway she'd understood — he saw her understand, the way she let her shoulders down and stopped trying. Some things the body learns before the mouth can argue.

"My knees are finished," she said.

"Ja."

"You also."

"Long finished."

She huffed something that was nearly a laugh and turned for the door, and the white plateau took her in silhouette, and for one frame she was exactly the picture she'd been chasing — a person, small, in an enormous empty mouth of stone, going out into the light. Jakobus didn't say so. The camera was at her side. The shot was gone the instant it existed, which was the only honest way a thing like that ever came.

The descent was worse than the climb, the way it always is, the body's brakes long since spent.

Sami went first, reading the steps, calling the loose ones back over his shoulder. Lena went second, and a hundred steps down her bad knee buckled on a worn lip and she went sideways into the cliff and Jakobus had her elbow before her weight finished arriving, his own knee screaming at the catch, and he held her against the rock until her breath came back.

“I’ve got it,” she said, which she didn’t.

“I know,” he said, which they both knew was a lie, and he took the heavy bag off her shoulder onto his and didn’t give her the chance to argue.

He went down in front of her after that, one slow step at a time, a rail she could put a hand on if the leg went again, the strap of her gear cutting into him and his knee turning to glass and the great cool empty room receding above them with its throat full of wind. Below, somewhere in the folded city, the Beast waited in the heat with its weeping water bag, and beyond the city the lights of Wadi Musa would be coming on while it was still day — the town that never stopped being a town, where people lived who had never once needed the inside of the Monastery to be anything but what it was.

He kept his eyes on the next step, and the next, and carried what he was carrying, and did not say a single one of the things the room had told him.

Chapter 8 — Down to Wadi Musa

The Monastery did not let go of you quickly. That was the trick of it, Jakobus thought, going down — the stone held its grip on a body long after the body had turned to leave. Eight hundred and fifty steps, give or take. He'd counted on the way up the way you count anything to keep the lid on. He was not counting now. Now he was watching Lena's feet.

She came down stiff-legged on the bad knee, planting the good one first and lowering herself like a woman twice her age, one hand on the rock wall where the rock allowed it, the other clamped on his forearm. Her camera bag hung off his shoulder with his own kit. He had not asked and she had not protested, which told him how far gone she was. Lena Voss protested everything. The silence was her body negotiating a truce with the day.

"Slow," he said, in the flat register that didn't ask for anything. "We've got all the light."

"You're limping."

"I'm geological. Same thing." He took the next step before she could answer, so the step took the conversation.

Sami went ahead of them, sure-footed, picking the line the way water picks a line — already knowing where the loose scree was, where the worn lip of a step would roll an ankle, calling it back over his shoulder without turning his head. *Left of the cracked one. Big drop here, take it with both feet.* He didn't hurry and he didn't slow. A man walking down stairs his great-grandfather walked down. No theatre in

it. Jakobus had spent his whole life learning to move through ground like it owed him nothing, and here was a man who'd never had to learn it, born already knowing, and the contrast did not sting. It steadied him. Somebody in front who knew the way.

The light changed as they descended, the way it does in that country only at the two ends of the day. He felt it before he registered it — a softening on the back of his neck, the heat going out of the air in increments. Then he looked up at the cliff opposite and the rose of it was deepening, going from the dusty pink of midday to something with blood in it, then past blood, the iron in the stone pulling toward purple as the sun dropped behind the ridge. The shadow filled the wadi from the bottom up, like water filling a vessel. For a moment the whole northwest face above them held the last of the sun and burned, and the part already in shadow went a cold violet, and the line between the two crept up the rock as he watched.

It was too much. He knew the feeling and did not fight it — a day of scale and emptiness and the wind's note inside that empty room, and now the light doing this, all of it landing at once on a nervous system that had been running hot since the climb. He let his eyes go to the next step instead. The middle distance. Stone he could put a boot on. You take the overload in by the side door or it knocks you flat.

"There," Sami said quietly, not pointing, just tipping his chin at the burning face. "Better than noon. Noon is for the postcards." A beat. "This one nobody can sell properly. The camera makes it orange. It is not orange."

Lena said nothing. She did not lift the camera. That, more than the buckled knee, told Jakobus the day had taken what it was going to take from her.

The stalls came up as they reached the lower path — the trinket spreads on blankets, the brass and the beads and the strung scarves, half of them already being folded and bundled into sacks. The selling-day was ending. A Bedouin woman crouched over a cloth, gathering small carved camels into a tin, and she did not even look up to try one last sale; she had read the three of them at a glance — wrung out, no buying left in them — and went on packing. Jakobus respected that read. She'd done the same arithmetic on him he did on a checkpoint,

and come up correct.

Past the stalls, children. Three, then five, materialising off the rocks the way children do, barefoot and quick, and one of them — a boy, maybe eight, missing teeth — cupped his hands and shouted across the gap, the word every child everywhere shouts at the obvious foreigner. Bright with it. No edge. The naming-of-a-stranger that is just play, just *I see something new*.

Jakobus called back in Arabic — not the radio Arabic, the kitchen kind, the swallowed-consonant version of *good evening, are you well, go safe* he'd learned from people who weren't trying to teach him — and the boy's face cracked open in delight that the dull thing had a tongue. The whole pack descended then, chattering, and Jakobus answered in fragments, getting half, mangling the other half, which delighted them more. He had no sweets and no coins he wanted to give, so he gave them the only thing he had, which was the attention — which children always know is the realest currency anyway. One small girl walked beside him a hundred metres just to keep being looked at, then peeled off into the dusk without a word.

Sami watched this sidelong. "You did not learn that this week."

"No."

"Mm." Sami left it. That was its own kind of seeing, the leaving-it.

The park gate. The official channel, the turnstiles, the staff who hadn't bothered counting them. The crowd that had been thick as flies at the Khazneh that morning was simply *gone* — drained out ahead of them with the daylight — and the emptiness arrived against his chest like cool water. He hadn't known how loud the day had been until it stopped. No tour-guide voices, no clatter of two hundred shutters, no bus diesel. Just the three of them and the dark coming up out of the rock and somewhere a goat bell. He took a long breath of it. The shades had gone up into his hair somewhere on the descent and he left them there now; there was no one to be read by, and nothing to hide from, and the cooling air felt good on his eyes.

A man in a park uniform sat at the gate, dozing on a plastic chair. Out of old habit Jakobus's hand went toward his hair to bring the glasses down so he could take them off properly for the uniform — then stopped, because the man was asleep and the day was over and

the only authority left in this gorge was the dark. He let his hand fall. Even the discipline could rest, here, for a minute.

Then they were out, and the gorge gave them up to the town.

Wadi Musa came at him all at once and from a different direction than the wonder had. The wonder had been scale and silence and stone. This was small and warm and loud in the right way. Lights strung on the slope, the whole town climbing the hill in tiers of yellow window-glow. The call to prayer went up from a minaret somewhere above them, the muezzin's voice unspooling over the rooftops, and a second answered it from across the valley a half-beat behind, the two of them weaving. Under that, the smell — woodsmoke and lamb fat and onions going down in oil, cardamom, bread. A motorbike somewhere. A television through an open door. People who lived here, doing the thing people do at the end of a day, which is feed each other.

His body wanted that more than it wanted anything. Not the ruin. The kitchen.

Lena had stopped, swaying slightly, looking up at the lit town with an expression he couldn't read in the dark. "I thought it would be a museum," she said. "I thought you came to the dead city and then you left. I didn't think anyone —" she gestured, vaguely, at the smell, the lights, the prayer. "Lived next to it. Like it's just the hill behind the house."

"It is just the hill behind the house," Sami said. "My grandfather kept goats in tombs. The kings' tombs. Good shade." He said it without weight, a fact, and it landed heavier than anything carved had all day — that the empty stone Jakobus had stood inside two hours ago with his heart in his throat had also, within living memory, been somebody's goat shed. Both true. Neither cancelling the other.

Sami stopped at a low doorway spilling light and turned to them. "My cousin's son. Married Thursday. Tonight the men eat, the women are next door — there is too much food, there is always too much food, it is shameful how much." He was already half inside, holding the door. "Come. You will sit, you will be fed, nobody will photograph you, and tomorrow your knees will still hurt but you will have eaten well first."

Lena hesitated. He watched her do the calculation a tired profes-

sional does — the camera bag, the early start she'd planned, the foreignness of it, the wanting-to-be-clean-and-alone-in-a-hotel of a person at the end of herself. He understood it. He'd done it himself, a hundred times, at a hundred doors, and learned, eventually, which way the answer should go.

"We'd be honoured," Jakobus said, before she could choose for both of them. He felt her glance at him. "You can shoot the wedding food in the morning if your hands won't sit still. Tonight you eat it." He shifted the bags higher on his shoulder and ducked his head under the lintel. "Come on. They'll think we're rude, and then I'll have to fix something to make up for it."

He stepped into the warmth and the noise, and the door of the living town closed the dead one behind him, and for the length of one breath, going in, he was not a man reading the room. He was just a guest, hungry, let inside.

Chapter 9 — Wadi Musa: Still Lived In

The house was up a side street with no name Jakobus could find on any sign, three turns off the main road and then a flight of concrete steps lit by a single bulb that buzzed when the night-wind moved it. Sami went up the steps like a man going home, which he was. Jakobus came after, his knee announcing each riser, and Lena last, holding the rail, her camera bag worn across her chest like something she was protecting and something protecting her.

The door was open before they reached it. A woman in her sixties — Sami's aunt, *khalti*, the word given fast and unbothered — filled the frame and then was past it, hands out, talking at a speed Jakobus only half-caught, the dialect rounder than the Cairo Arabic worn into him, the vowels longer. He gave her the greeting back in the shape he had, the swallowed *kayf halek* of a man who had drunk a great deal of tea in tents that were not this tent, and watched her face do the small thing he had watched faces do his whole life: hear that he had not learned them from a book, and soften.

"He talks," she said to Sami, delighted, as if Jakobus were a clever animal. He let her have it. It was true enough.

Inside was heat and light and too many people for the room. A wedding two days off, Sami had said on the descent — not tonight; tonight was only family eating because family ate — and the only-family was a dozen, fifteen, children underfoot and a television muttering in a corner nobody watched. The press of it landed against the back of his eyes, the old overload reaching up, the room with no clear exit. He found the wall, put his shoulder to it, breathed once on the count

of the room's own rhythm, and let it come down a notch. Nobody saw. That was the whole point of the wall.

Lena stood in the doorway a beat too long, a tall pale woman in field clothes with a thousand-dollar lens against her sternum, and Jakobus watched her not know what to do with her hands. He had seen this too. She was a person who arranged the world through a frame, and the world had just refused the frame entirely — no composition here, only chaos that was actually order, only people being people at her without permission.

"Sit," he said to her, low. "Eat what they give you. You don't have to talk."

She sat where a cushion appeared. A glass of tea was in her hand before she'd agreed to want one, sweet enough to stand a spoon in, mint crushed against the side. She drank it because there was nothing else to do, and her shoulders, which had been up around her ears since the Monastery, came down a finger's width.

The kettle gave him the room.

An old electric one, the kind sold on every roadside from here to Mombasa. It had stopped working some weeks back — the aunt mimed it for Sami, the dead button, the cold spout — and a younger man had been boiling water on the gas instead, and everyone had decided that was simply how it was now. Jakobus had clocked it the way he clocked everything, sitting there with his tea: the dead kettle on the counter, the pot wheezing on the ring beside it.

"May I?" he said, in his three words of asking-permission, and held his hand toward it.

The aunt waved at it the way you wave at a thing already given up on.

He took it to the floor where the light was best and got the base off with the smallest of his folding knives — two screws, both the soft cheap kind that strip if you breathe on them, and he did not breathe on them. Inside was exactly what it always was: a thermal fuse popped, a contact gone green with the steam it lived in. He scraped the contact bright with the back of the blade. The fuse he could not replace, but he could bridge it — a risk on a thing made

to fail safe, and he would not have done it on his own kettle. But it was their kettle and they were boiling on the gas like it was 1950, and a man could only stand so much of that. He stripped the conductor from a length of cord off his vest, twisted it in, seated the base, set it on its stand, and thumbed the switch.

It hummed. The light came on inside the spout, a small orange eye, and the water began, in a minute, to roar.

A boy of about seven had watched the whole operation from a forearm's distance, breath held. When the kettle roared he looked at Jakobus the way you look at a man who has done a small impossible thing, and Jakobus, who had no children he was allowed to be near, looked back and did not smile too much — too much frightens them — and said, "*Tamam.*" The boy said "*Tamam*" back, fierce with it, and ran to tell the others.

The aunt put a plate in front of Jakobus that had not been there before. It had the best of everything on it. He understood the grammar of that and ate all of it, slowly, in front of her, because to eat what they put in front of you, by their hand, in their house, was the only thank-you that landed.

Sami, across the room, was watching him with an expression he could not have named and did not try to.

Later — the plates cleared, a light switch in the back room found hanging out of the wall and fixed in four minutes with the same screwdriver-shaped patience, the wire capped and tucked and the plate screwed flush so it would stop frightening the children who'd been told not to touch it — later there was a settling, the way a full room settles after food. The children slower. The men leaning back. A hookah brought out that Jakobus declined with a hand on his chest and no explanation, and got none asked for.

Sami sat beside him with two fresh glasses.

"You fixed my aunt's kettle," he said. "Now she will not let you leave."

"I bridged a fuse. It'll fail again in a year. Tell her to buy the German one — costs three times as much, lasts ten."

"Boots, hat, kettle," Sami said. Jakobus glanced at him, and Sami's

face had the dry pleasure of a man who had been listening, on the long descent, more than he let on. Jakobus let that one go past too. It had landed close enough.

“My grandfather guided the first ones,” Sami said after a while, not looking at Jakobus, looking at the room. “When the tourists started. Before that the family lived in the tombs. *In* them — you understand. The Royal Tombs, the caves above the theatre. My father was born in one.” He turned the glass. “Then the government said no, you cannot live in the antiquity, it is for the world now, and built us this town, and we came down off the rock. Some were angry. My grandfather said: they took the house, they gave us the road. He meant the tourists. The road is the tourists.” He drank. “It is good money. It is also a man standing in his own front door selling postcards of the bedroom he was born in. Both. You see?”

“I see,” Jakobus said, and meant the word the way he meant it.

“The water you liked. The cisterns.” Sami nodded at his own thought. “My uncle still knows where the old channels run. Not in any book. The boys do not learn it now — why would they, the pipe comes from the town, the government pipe. So it goes.” He said it without grief, the way you say a true thing you have made your peace with. “Some things they did not write down. So now we get to be clever about them forever, the few of us still bothering.”

Jakobus turned his own glass and did not fill the silence, because filling it would have been the worse thing.

Across the room Lena had her phone out, and for a bad second Jakobus thought she'd reached for the lens, for the frame, for the thing she did instead of being in a place. But it was photos she was showing — her own, from the small bright screen — to a knot of children collected around her the way iron collects around a magnet, the seven-year-old kettle-boy at the front.

Ice, a glacier she'd shot somewhere blue and impossible. A whale's tail going down. A city at night from very high, all wired with gold. The children's hands reached and she let them swipe, guiding the small fingers, and where she had no word and they had no word they had the picture, and the picture was enough — *snow*, she said, and

one of the older girls said something back in Arabic and Lena said “*snow*” again and the girl tried it, *isnoh*, and the room laughed, and Lena laughed, the camera flat against her chest now and forgotten, her face doing a thing Jakobus had not seen it do in two days.

She caught him watching. She did not look away. She held it a second, across the warm crowded room, two foreigners far from anything either could call home, and then went back to the children and the pictures, and Jakobus felt the old thing turn over in his chest that he had no good name for and did not need one.

He had something for the boy. He always carried a small thing. Not the knife on his thigh — that he would not give here; the night didn’t ask for it — but in his vest, among the smooth stones and the dead coins, a roll of film, real film, 400 speed, that he’d had no camera for in years and kept the way he kept the rest. He pressed it into the boy’s hand and folded the fingers over it and said the asking-permission shape of words turned the other way, and Sami translated: *if your uncle still has the old camera. And the woman will send the pictures she takes. She has promised.* Lena, hearing her name, looked up, and Jakobus held her eye, and she understood she had just promised something — and, he watched it happen, decided to keep it.

“I’ll send prints,” she said. “Real ones. To the house.” Sami gave it to the aunt, and the aunt put her hand flat on her chest.

The night had gone to that hour where the children sleep where they sit and the men’s talk drops to the low register of men who have said everything and are content to keep sitting anyway. Outside, beyond the buzzing bulb, the town was quieting — a dog, a last scooter, the wind off the rock that had been cold up there and was only cool down here.

The road pulled at him. It always pulled at this hour, the freedom-wire tightening, the part of him that did not know how to be still in a room with a roof. The Beast was parked below with the dust of two days on it, the King’s Highway ran south through country he half knew, and there was a clean simple animal want in him to go — to be moving, to be no one’s guest and no one’s anything.

He did not go.

He sat with the cooling glass and the sleeping children and the old man across the room who had begun, very softly, to sing something he couldn't follow, a thread of a melody worn smooth as the stones in his pocket, and he let the want stand at the door unanswered. The aunt would not let him leave; Sami had said it as a joke and it was not entirely a joke. And he found — this was the thing, the turn, the soft astonishing thing he would not have said aloud to a living soul — that he did not, for once, want past the door as badly as the wire said he should.

He had been let in. Not waved through. Not read-past and dismissed and gone. *Let in*, by people who owed him nothing, into the warm noisy middle of their ordinary night, and the kettle was theirs and the boy had his name in his mouth and the singing went on, and a man who had spent his whole life on the right side of every border he could not cross sat for once square in the middle of a place that had simply opened and held still around him.

The road would be there in the morning. It always was.

He stayed in the warm a while longer, and let it.

Chapter 10 — Packing the Road

He woke the way he always did before a leaving — before the alarm, before the light, in the grey hour when the muezzin's call had not yet come and the town held its breath. The room was cool. The blanket Sami's aunt had pressed on him last night lay folded at the foot of the bed, where he had put it back the moment his eyes opened, because a man leaves a room the way he found it or he has no business sleeping in it.

His knee spoke when he stood. He let it speak. Eight hundred and fifty steps down a mountain will say something the next morning, and a man who has lived this long does not argue with the bill.

He packed in the dark, mostly by feel. The waistcoat first, laid across the chair the way you lay out kit you trust — pockets checked left to right, the same order every time, because the day you change the order is the day you reach for the thing that isn't there. Stones in their pocket, two of them river-smooth and coloured, the worn copper coin sitting cold among them. The Leatherman. The small tin of cayenne, lid checked. The hanky, clean, folded square. He ran a thumbnail along the braid on his wrist out of habit, found the knot where it should be, left it.

The boots last. He worked his feet in slow, the broad splay of them filling the leather they'd been beaten into over years, and laced them with the cord still good from yesterday. There was a basin in the corner. He washed, dried on his own cloth, hung the guest house towel back on its rail untouched and dry. He smoothed the bed. He stood the chair square to the small table. When he looked back from

the door there was nothing in the room to say he had ever been in it, and that was correct.

He carried his bag down the narrow stair quiet as a thief, which was only the old discipline, and met the smell of coffee before he met the kitchen.

Sami was at the low table with the brass pot and a tray — flatbread, white cheese, a bowl of olives dark as the onyx he no longer carried, a saucer of date paste. He looked up without surprise. “You sleep three hours,” he said. “Maybe four. You woke before the call.”

“Habit,” Jakobus said.

“Bad habit.”

“The worst kind. The useful ones.”

Sami poured. The coffee came cardamom-dark, and the pot was the same one he’d soldered the handle back onto last night with the tip of a folding tool and a borrowed lighter, and neither of them mentioned it. Lena came in a few minutes later in yesterday’s clothes, hair flat on one side, moving like her knee had its own opinions. She lowered herself onto a cushion with the careful grace of the genuinely wrecked and took the glass Sami put in front of her with both hands.

“What time is it,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

“Early,” Jakobus said. “Drink your tea.”

She drank it. The early light came up grey, then gold at the high window, and the town began the small noises of a place that had never been a museum — a shutter, a kettle, a child’s voice, a donkey somewhere putting the world on notice. Lena had her camera in her lap and did not raise it. That was new. She watched the light climb the wall instead, with the rest of her face, and Jakobus filed that and said nothing.

“You’ll send the prints,” Sami said to her. Not a question either.

“I’ll send the prints.”

“To the boy with the front tooth gone. He will check the post every day for a month and then forget, and then it will come, and he will be a man and remember.” Sami tore bread. “That is how it works.”

They ate. The conversation went slow and ran out and came back, the way it does at a table where nobody is performing. Sami told a small story about a German engineer who had come to map the cisterns in the seventies and stayed nine months and married a woman from up the valley and was buried here now, and the way he told it the German was one of theirs by the end, the foreignness worn off him like dust off a windscreen. Jakobus understood the story was for him. He let it sit. He did not say *I have been buried in places that don't keep records*, because that was true and useless and not for this table.

When the food was gone he reached into the waistcoat for the envelope.

He had counted it last night, alone, by the light of the smartwatch. Now he set it on the tray between the cheese and the olives, square, the way you put down a thing you mean.

Sami looked at it the way a man looks at an insult he is choosing not to take. "You ate my aunt's food."

"I did. It was the best food in Jordan and I'll fight a man who says otherwise."

"You fixed her kettle. You fixed the light. You carried the woman's camera up a mountain and you carried a tourist who fainted down half of one. You are a guest."

"I'm a man who was hired to do a job," Jakobus said, flat, "and the job had a guide who is the best I've worked with on any ground. A guide gets paid what a guide is worth, or the next foreigner who comes through here gets him for less, and then his children get less, and that's not a favour I'll do them." He didn't raise his voice. He never raised his voice. He pushed the envelope an inch closer. "I'll be a guest tonight, in my head, on the road. Right now I'm a client paying a bill. Take it before your aunt comes down and I have to fight both of you, because I'll lose, and I've got driving to do."

Lena, behind her glass, made a sound that might have been a laugh.

Sami looked at him a long moment. Then he picked up the envelope and put it inside his own jacket without counting it, which was its own kind of answer, and the thing between them settled the way a load settles when you've packed it right — felt, not seen.

“Wait,” Sami said. He got up and went into the back of the house and came back with his hand closed, and opened it.

A stone. Small, flat, the rose-red sandstone of the place, but with a vein of white quartz running through it clean as a seam of light, the way the cliffs ran where the iron gave way to something purer underneath. It had been picked up, not bought. He could see that. The edges were soft from a wadi the way the boyhood ones in his pocket were soft, and somebody — a boy, a father, the German engineer for all he knew — had carried it and set it down, and it had come to Sami, and now Sami was setting it in his palm.

“For the pocket,” Sami said. “Where the others are. So the rock remembers you were in it.”

Jakobus held it. The weight of it. He did not say it was beautiful and he did not say thank you twice, because a man who knows what a gift costs the giver does not paper over it with noise. He closed his hand on it once, slow, and put it in the stone pocket with the others, and it went in among them like it had always been short one.

“*Ngikhona*,” he said. Quiet. The wrong language for this country and exactly the right word.

Sami didn’t know it. But he heard what was under it — he was a man who heard what was under things, it was half of why he was good — and he nodded once, gravely, the way you answer a thing you’ve understood without translating.

Lena was watching them both. She did not lift the camera. He thought she had finally learned the one thing the whole trip had been trying to teach her: that some pictures you take with the back of your eyes and keep, and the ones you can keep are never the ones the magazine wants.

He went to the window before he left. Wadi Musa lay below in the new gold — the flat roofs and the satellite dishes and the minaret, the goat path threading up between the houses to where the rock began. The living town that the dead city had birthed and then outlived and then needed; the maintenance bill of permanence paid in donkeys and shutters and a boy who would check the post for a month. The cisterns were up there somewhere under all of it, still catching what little rain came, still doing the one true job, while the brochures sold

the empty pretty face down the gorge.

He had the city in his head now, and it was not the Treasury. It was a clay pipe with a male-female joint sealed two thousand years ago by a man who would never be named and had not been trying to be. That was what he'd carry out. He'd wanted the gold, the first morning. He was not ashamed of having wanted it. He just knew better now, and knowing better was the only treasure that ever actually weighed anything.

The comfort of the table was already going thin in him, the way it always did — the warmth peeling back the moment the bag was on his shoulder, the old restlessness coming up underneath it cold and clean and not unwelcome. He had been here long enough to be missed, and that was the longest a man like him should ever stay anywhere. The road was already pulling at the soles of his boots.

The Beast sat in the lane below where he'd left it, dust-coloured, sun-faded, the weeping hessian bag on its flank dark with seep, looking like a thing nobody would steal and nobody would look at twice. Two countries of dirt on it. His one constant. The single object on the whole earth that still answered him the same way every morning, on any ground, in any tongue.

He came down and walked round it once, the slow circuit — tyres, the snorkel mouth, the bag, a hand flat on the bonnet to feel for nothing in particular and find it. He lifted the bonnet and looked at the straight-six the way you look at a face you trust, checked the oil with two fingers, dropped the bonnet soft so it didn't bang the town awake. Turned the key. The engine came up from sleep with that deep balanced growl that scared no birds this early, because he kept it low, kept it decent, the way he kept everything down for everyone but himself.

Sami stood in the doorway with his arms folded. Lena came out with her bag and her camera and her ruined knee and stopped beside the door, blinking in the light.

"There's a checkpoint south of Ma'an," Sami said. "Past the turn. New boys. They like papers."

"They'll get them," Jakobus said. He patted the top of the dash, twice, soft. "That'll do, pig," he told the truck, to no one, and put it in gear.

The town slid back in the mirror, gold going to white as the sun cleared the ridge. He had a stone in his pocket the rock had remembered him by, an envelope he'd won an argument over, and a long flat road ahead with new boys and old papers at the far end of it. He drove out the way he'd come in, slow through the lane, then faster as the houses thinned, the bass left off and the engine doing all the talking, alone again and steady with it, the way he was built.

Chapter 11 — The King's Highway South

The Beast took the first long grade out of Wadi Musa the way it took everything — without complaint and without hurry, the inline-six holding the climb at a low even growl Jakobus felt in his seat before he heard it. The town fell away behind them in tiers of pale stone and satellite dishes, and then there was only the highway, two lanes of patched tar running south through a country that opened its hands and let go of everything but light.

Lena was asleep inside twenty minutes. She had her camera bag in her lap and her head against the window, and she had stopped fighting the road's small motions the way the truly tired do — let it rock her, gave it the weight. Her knee was propped on the dash where she'd folded it without thinking. The bruise had gone the colour of a thunderhead. She did not stir when the tyres found a join in the tar and thudded.

He let her sleep. He did not turn the music up. He had it down low — decent for guests, the bass in the floor more than the air, a thing you stood on rather than listened to — and Sami, in the back with his elbow out the window and his keffiyeh loose at his throat, watched the land go by like a man reading a letter he already knew by heart.

"There," Sami said, after a while, and pointed past Jakobus's shoulder at a dark fold in the hills to the east. "Shaubak. The crusader castle. They built it where the road was, because the road was the country. Always the road." He smiled, not at Jakobus, at the window. "We are all just following where the water and the trade went. Two thousand years, and the line does not move."

Jakobus nodded. He understood that. The King's Highway under the tar was older than any king who'd named it; men had walked this exact axis with frankincense on their camels because the geology said *here* and the wells said *here*, and the tar just made it faster to be wrong about where you were going. He kept his eyes on the road and let Sami talk, the way you let a fire talk — not for information, for company.

The light kept changing. That was the thing about leaving early; you drove down a country that was still deciding what colour to be. The hills to the west went from grey to apricot to a rose so close to Petra's own stone that for a moment Jakobus thought the whole land was made of the same skin as the Khazneh — and maybe it was, the same Umm Ishrin sandstone, iron and manganese, the city just the one place men had loved it enough to cut a face into it. Sami named the ridges as they passed. Jakobus filed them in the pattern part of his mind, the part that did not bother with the words but kept the shapes.

He had thought, coming in, that he would carry the Treasury home. Everybody did. He had wanted to — had felt the old documentary romance reach up in him in the Siq, *gold, a pharaoh's hoard, a hidden room* — and Sami had cut it out of him gently, the way you take a thorn out of a dog's pad, before it could fester. *Tomb, not treasury. The face, not the room.* What he carried instead, what had hooked into the part of him that was an engineer before it was anything else, was the cistern. The settling basin with its lintel worn smooth. The ceramic pipe, wheel-thrown, the male-female joint sealed with lime two thousand years ago and still holding the curve of the hand that threw it. *Nobody photographs the keeping.* A desert city of forty thousand souls on fifteen centimetres of rain a year, alive because men had owned the rain long enough to cut a promise into stone. That was the thing in his pocket now. Not the postcard. The plumbing.

He reached up without looking and touched the dash, twice, soft. "That'll do," he said, under his breath, to the truck and to no one.

The checkpoint came at him the way they always did — first the cones, then the low cinderblock booth, then the soldier stepping into the lane with one hand raised and the other resting easy on the sling of a rifle he had no intention of using. Beyond the booth the road ran on into nothing, and the nothing was the most beautiful thing Jakobus

had seen all morning.

He took the shades off before the soldier reached the window. Folded them, hooked them into the open neck of his shirt, let the man see his eyes — pale that morning, grey going green, the squint-seamed honesty of a face with nothing in it to hide. He had done this ten thousand times across a continent that did not exist on any of his passports, and it never stopped being the cheapest and best thing he owned: bare-eyed, harmless, here.

"Sabah al-khayr," Jakobus said, and the soldier's chin lifted a fraction — not the radio-Arabic of a tourist's phrasebook but the swallowed, easy thing of a man who had learned it from men, somewhere, in some kitchen. *"Sabah an-nur,"* the soldier answered, and the morning between them eased by exactly that much.

The papers were in the cubby, clipped, in order — the survey commission, Lena's accreditation, the vehicle import documents the colour of two countries' dust. Jakobus handed them over the way you hand a man your open hands. The soldier was young. He flipped to the import sheet and his face did the small honest work of a man finding a thing he wasn't sure about: a Land Cruiser on South African plates, freighted across an ocean, the carnet stamp in a place his thumb wanted to find and didn't, quite.

"Hadhihi—" The soldier turned the page, turned it back. The stamp had bled where the customs man in Aqaba had pressed it on a damp pad, the date a smear under the eagle. He looked up, not unfriendly, the question on him: *this one, here, I cannot read it.*

Jakobus did not lean. He never leaned at a checkpoint; leaning was a man with somewhere to be, and a man with somewhere to be was a man worth slowing down. He turned in his seat, slow, and put his finger beside the smear without touching the page. *"Al-Aqaba,"* he said. *"Al-jumruk."* Aqaba, customs. Then, dry, with the small shrug of one working man to another about the eternal incompetence of ink and rubber: the stamp was fine, the pad was tired, the port was the port. He said it half in Arabic and half in the gesture, and somewhere in it was the joke that the date underneath was the same date as God's own boredom, and the soldier's mouth twitched.

In the back, Sami said something low and Bedouin and amused, and the soldier glanced at him, placed the keffiyeh, the bones of the face,

the country in it — *one of ours, with the foreigners* — and that placed Jakobus too. The thing about a checkpoint was never the paper. It was who you were standing next to.

The soldier handed the documents back through the window. He had a cheap government pen tucked behind his ear, and as he passed the clip across, the pen slipped and went down into the dust at his boots. He stooped for it; came up with it cracked along the barrel, dry — the desert killing it the way the desert killed everything cheap and unprepared.

Jakobus reached into the waistcoat without thinking. Among the pockets that earned their keep there was a pen that was not cheap — machined aluminium, a thing that did three honest jobs and would do a fourth if a man ever needed it to, which he had never told anyone and never would. He turned it in his fingers, weighed the giving of it, then reached past it for the other thing: a stub of pencil and, beside it, a plain blue ballpoint with a hotel's name half worn off it, the kind a man accumulates and never spends.

He held it out the window, butt-first. "*Khudh-ha*," he said. *Take it*. And then, because a thing given is a thing that can shame the taker, he made it nothing — flicked his eyes at the cracked one in the soldier's hand and gave the smallest grimace, *that one's finished, the heat ate it, here* — so it crossed as a swap and not a charity, a man with a spare doing the obvious decent thing on a hot road.

The soldier took it. Clicked it twice, the way men click a borrowed pen to know it's real, and a thing went over his young face out of all proportion to a blue biro — the registering of being seen, of a stranger having clocked the small daily indignity of a dead pen and quietly fixed it. He straightened, stepped back, waved them through with the pen still in his hand. Jakobus put the shades back on as the booth slid past the mirror, the lenses going dark against the climbing sun the way his father's had, the eyes back behind their glass now that there was no one left to be honest at.

The cones ended. The tar ran on. Lena had not woken.

And the country opened.

That was the only word for what the land did past the last cone — it opened, the way a held breath opens, the hills standing back from the

road and the road running out flat and pale into a distance that had no edge to it, only haze and the blue ghosts of mountains so far they might have been the curve of the earth itself. Empty. Possible. The exact thing his whole nervous system had been wound tight against without his knowing it, since the first cinderblock booth came into view — the gate, the paper, the man with the right to say *no* — gone now, behind him, paid and cleared, and ahead of him nothing but the going.

The relief of it went through his chest like warmth off a fire. His hand found the seat, his pulse found the slow bass under the floor and settled onto it, a heart matched to a bar that went on forever. The wall came down a notch.

And under the relief — he let himself feel it, the way he let himself feel things now, late, in a country that wasn't his — there was the other thing. The pang. The cistern in his pocket and the cousin's wedding he would not stay for and the boy whose prints Lena would post from somewhere and never see land; the lime joint holding its curve in the dark under the colonnade, the keeping that went on whether anyone photographed it or not, that had gone on two thousand years and would go on after he was gone down some road that wasn't this one. He had walked into the rock and the rock had remembered, Sami said. *So the rock remembers you were in it.* A stone in his pocket against all the stones he had ever kept. He had not finished there. You never finished there. You only ever drove out, carrying the part you could carry.

Sami was quiet in the back now, watching the emptiness with him.

Jakobus eased the truck up to a hundred-and-twenty and let it sit, the inline-six dropping into the long even note it was built to make, the country pouring past, and somewhere far ahead the haze and the blue and the road going down into all of it. He kept his eyes on the line. He did not say any of what was in him. He never did.

He just drove south, into the open, with the cistern in his head.

Chapter 12 — The Cistern in His Head

The overlook was nothing — a gravel apron where a culvert crossed, a flat place where trucks pulled off to let their engines cool. Jakobus took it because the light was right, the road ahead empty for fifteen kilometres in either direction, and there was a man in the rear-view who needed to stop being on the road for ten minutes before the road took the whole of him.

He killed the engine. The silence came in the way it does in big country — not as absence but as a thing with its own weight, the tick of cooling metal small underneath it.

Lena did not wake. She had her temple against the glass, the camera bag clutched in her lap the way a child holds a toy it has been told to leave behind, and the bruise on her knee had gone the colour of a thundercloud overnight. He let her sleep. Sleep was the best work she could do today.

He got the burner out from under the seat, and the little screw-together pot, the bag of beans, the battered hand grinder, and set them on the tailgate. He did it the way he did it every dawn — not as a ritual he performed but as the one thing the day was not allowed to take from him. The grinder caught and turned, caught and turned. The smell came up over the dust. It was the only argument he ever made before noon and he made it to no one.

Sami had got out without a word, walked a little way off, and stood at the edge of the apron with his back to the truck, looking east. He did not look like a man waiting. He looked like a man checking a thing he had checked his whole life and would check again tomorrow — that

the horizon was where he had left it.

The pot ticked, then sang, low, and Jakobus took it off the flame before it went bitter. He had two tin mugs. He filled both and carried one out to where Sami stood and put it in his hand without asking.

“Shukran,” Sami said. He did not turn.

They drank. The sun was still behind the eastern scarp, and the land below them went from grey to the colour of old blood and then, as he watched, to rose — the same stone he had walked through for three days, only here it was the whole world of it, ridge after ridge running south toward the Hejaz, and you understood, looking at it, that Petra had not been a miracle in a dead place. It had been a clever thing built in the middle of a great deal more of the same. Water had been the only miracle. The rest was just rock that took a chisel kindly.

He had wanted gold. He could admit that now, drinking coffee on a roadside with his knee aching and a German woman asleep behind him. He had walked into the Siq three days ago wanting the thing the brochure wanted him to want — the locked face, the hidden hoard, the chamber nobody had found. He had wanted the Khazneh to be a treasury, because a treasury is a story you can hold in one hand, and a tomb façade with nothing behind it is just a man’s grief made permanent at enormous cost. He had been a little angry at Sami for the correction. He could admit that too.

He felt in the waistcoat pocket and found the stone.

It was nothing — Sami’s nephew had pressed it on him in the doorway yesterday morning, a flat chip of the rose sandstone with a seam of paler quartz running through it like milk stirred into tea. Not a crystal. Not one he’d have picked off a verge as a boy. The boy had found it good and given it freely, and the giving was the thing, so it went in the pocket with the worn copper coins and the boyhood crystals and the black — no. The onyx was gone, given away a country and a year ago. The pocket was lighter than it used to be. He noticed it the way you notice a tooth pulled clean: a smoothness where a thing used to be.

He turned the stone over with his thumb and let his mind do the thing it could not help doing.

The dams first — the great low walls thrown across the wadis above

the city, not to hold the water back forever but to bleed the flash floods sideways, to take the one murderous half-hour of a year's rain and break its run so the city below did not drown in the same hour it would otherwise have died of thirst. Then the channels cut into the gorge walls, and the settling basins where the water stood long enough to drop its sand, and the pipe — he kept coming back to the pipe. Wheel-thrown segments the length of a forearm, the male end of one socketed into the female of the next, the joint smeared with lime cement, the whole run laid not full and pressurised but at a calculated slope, so the water moved at an open-channel speed that would not chew the pipe to nothing in a generation. Somebody had worked that out. Somebody had broken enough fast pipes to learn that the slow pipe outlived them all. Sami had shown him a segment yesterday, in a cistern's mouth out behind the staff houses where no tourist went, and Jakobus had put his hand flat on it the way he'd once put his hand in the tool-marks of an unfinished obelisk a thousand kilometres south, and felt the thumb of the man who'd thrown it on the wheel.

That was the marvel. Not that they could do it. That they had the patience to do it slow enough that it kept. Anyone clever can cut a face into a cliff in a season and call it forever. It takes a different kind of mind to cut a pipe like a promise — to build the thing nobody will ever photograph, and to build it so well that two thousand years later a tired man on a roadside can run the whole system in his head and find no fault in it.

He would not remember the Treasury. He had stood at its foot in the crush with three hundred phones up around him and felt almost nothing — a face, beautifully made, that meant exactly what a face means, which is less than people think. What he would carry out of this country, what was already settling into him the way the coffee was settling warm under his sternum, was the cistern. The dark cool of it. The pipe in his palm. The slope a dead man had calculated so the living would drink.

Permanence was not a monument. Permanence was somebody, every year, walking the channels with a basket and clearing the silt before the rain came. It was the keeping. It was Sami's people, who had never left, who knew where the water had run before there was a brochure to tell anyone Petra existed. Nobody photographs the

keeping. He understood now that this was not a complaint Sami had made. It was the whole point, said flat, and it had taken him three days to hear it.

Something moved at the edge of his eye.

A bird — a wheatear, pale and quick, the white flash of its rump as it dropped onto a fence post not four metres off and bobbed once, twice, and looked at him with the side of its head the way birds do, sizing him not as a threat but as a fact of the morning. He went still. He did not reach for anything. There was nothing to reach for and nothing to fix and nobody to disarm, and the stillness in him then was not the trained kind, the banked kind, the kind that came down over the eyes when a thing went dangerous. It was the other one. The one he so rarely got.

The bird held there a moment, the whole of it weighing perhaps as much as the coin in his pocket, going about the enormous business of being alive in a place that had been killing the unprepared for two thousand years and had not bothered, this morning, with the three of them. Then it dropped off the post and was gone over the lip of the scarp into all that rose-coloured air, and he let his breath out.

Behind him Lena stirred and made a small sound and did not wake.

Sami turned at last, the empty mug held loose in his fingers, and looked at Jakobus, and something passed across the guide's face that was almost a smile and was, more than that, a man taking the measure of another and finding the sum had come out where he'd hoped.

"You've got the face," Sami said. "The one people get." He nodded south, at all of it. "You'll go home and you'll bore everyone about the pipes."

"Ja," Jakobus said. "Probably."

He rinsed the pot with a swallow of water and packed the burner and the grinder and the beans back under the seat where they lived, and put the rose stone with its milk-vein deep in the waistcoat pocket where his thumb would find it on a bad night, and got back behind the wheel. The engine caught and held — Mark's work, two countries and a rebuild ago, faithful as the slow pipe.

He looked once more at the ridges running down toward the Hejaz, then checked the mirror for traffic that wasn't there, and pulled the Beast back onto the King's Highway, southbound, the cistern cool and complete in his head and the Treasury already going, going, gone behind him with the bird.

Chapter 13 — Parting Ways

The junction was nothing — a place where one bad road met a worse one, marked by a fuel drum on its side and a hand-painted sign whose Arabic had bled to ghosts in the sun. Jakobus pulled the Beast onto the verge and let the engine idle down, and the silence after it had the weight that silence only had out here, where the next sound was a long way off and in no hurry.

Lena was awake now. She sat up slow, the way she did everything since the Monastery, favouring the knee, and looked out at the empty cross of dirt as if it might rearrange itself into somewhere worth photographing. It didn't.

"He's late," she said.

"He's not late," Sami said from the back. "He is from here. He'll come when the dust says he's coming."

She made a sound that wanted to be a laugh and didn't have the strength for it.

Jakobus got out and stretched his back against the door, feeling the seams of the day open up in him — the knee, the night of bad sleep, the long descent still in his thighs. He left the shades on. There was no uniform here to take them off for, only the three of them and the land, and the land had already seen everything he had.

The dust came before the vehicle. A brown smear lifting off the southern road, then under it the rattle of a Hilux that had been a different colour once. It slowed, swung wide, and stopped at a respectful distance, the way you stopped a vehicle when you didn't yet know whose it was. A man leaned across and said something with Lena's name in it; she said yes, and that was the whole of the arrangement — a

fixer's fixer, a cousin's friend, a number passed down a line of trust Jakobus would never see the whole of and didn't need to.

She would go west and north from here, to a coast town and a flight and an editor and the postcard she'd come for, the one she hadn't quite got.

He pulled her cases out of the Beast himself. They were heavy with the wrong things — the long lenses, the tripod she'd hauled up eight hundred and fifty steps and used to photograph an empty room. He set them down by the Hilux without comment.

"You didn't have to," she said.

"I know."

She stood with her good hand on the warm metal of her ride and looked at him, trying to find the line that would do the job. People always tried to find the line. The good ones gave up and said the small true thing instead.

"You took me the long way," she said. "Round the back. The cistern, the pipes, the — keeping." She tried the word in her mouth, the one Sami had given them, and it sat there. "I came for the Treasury. I'm leaving with a clay pipe joint and a lecture about settling tanks." No anger in it. "I think it's better work. I don't know if I can sell it, but it's better work."

"It'll sell," Jakobus said. "Eventually. The pretty ones sell first. The true ones sell longest."

Something moved in her face — the start of the look Sami had named in him at the overlook, the one that comes when a thing reaches back through a person and changes the shape they thought they were. He didn't say so. You didn't tell someone they had it. You watched it happen and kept your count to yourself.

She turned to Sami, and here her composure went thin. "I don't know how to thank you for your house."

Sami didn't reach for her hand. He put his own flat against his chest, fingers spread over the heart, and inclined his head — the gesture that needed no language and admitted no falseness, an old courtesy worn smooth.

"You were a guest," he said. "There is nothing to thank. You ate, you slept under the roof, you saw my mother's face. That is finished business; it was never a debt." Then, quieter, in the register a man uses for a blessing he means: "*Tirja'i bi-salaam.*" Go back in peace. He let it sit, and added, in his careful English, so she would carry the exact shape of it: "Go well. Send the pictures of the cistern. Not for me. For the boy who showed you the stone."

Her eyes went wet at that and she did the brisk, embarrassed thing Europeans did with wet eyes, blinking it dry and busying her hands with the strap of a case. The driver loaded them with the unhurried economy of a man who'd loaded a thousand strangers' lives into the back of his truck. Jakobus watched her climb in awkwardly, hauling the knee after her, and lift her good hand once, palm out, the way you'd touch a window between you and someone leaving on a train.

The Hilux turned in a wide arc, found the western fork, and went down it trailing its banner of dust, and then it was a smear again, and then it was the land.

Sami stood beside him watching it go. His own ride — a battered Pajero with a cousin at the wheel and a back seat of feed sacks — had pulled up while Jakobus wasn't looking, the way the right things did out here. He was going east, home, the short way through country that had no name on Lena's map and every name in his.

"You will not stay," Sami said. It wasn't a question.

"No."

"The wedding is in two days. My uncle's grandson. There would be a place for you." He said it the way you offered a man a thing you already knew he'd refuse, so the offering itself was the gift and the refusal cost neither of you anything.

"I know there would," Jakobus said. And that was the thanks for it.

Sami looked at him a while. The afternoon stood very still around them, the heat coming up off the road in slow sheets. Out beyond the drum a wheatear had landed on a stone and was working at something, indifferent to all of it — a thing built small and hard enough to make a living in a place engineered to kill the unprepared.

"You read the water," Sami said. "Most who come, they read the gold.

The face on the cliff. They photograph the dead room and call it the heart. You went round the back, to where the rain was kept.” He nodded slowly, as if confirming something to himself. “My grandfather used to say the cleverness was never in the cutting. Anyone clever cuts a face in a season. The cleverness was in the pipe. The pipe was patience. You understand patience.”

“I understand it now,” Jakobus said. “I didn’t always.”

It was as close to the iceberg as he let the day come, and Sami, who heard everything, heard the size of what was under it and didn’t reach for it. That was the whole of why Jakobus liked him.

There was no proper way to end it, so they did the thing men did instead. Sami put out his hand. Jakobus took it, and Sami pulled — the small tug that turned a handshake into the other thing — and Jakobus went with it, the full front of the body committed, heart to heart, the embrace that didn’t pat and didn’t keep a circle. Two old men in a furnace, brief and exact. No performance in it. Sami’s hand pressed once between Jakobus’s shoulder blades, the way you’d settle a horse, and then they let go and stepped back, and neither of them had to look at the other’s face for a moment, which was its own kind of mercy.

“*Salaam*, Jacob,” Sami said. He’d taken to the old-world form somewhere in the week and Jakobus had let him.

“Go well, *Ammu*.”

Sami got into the Pajero. It coughed, caught, turned for the eastern fork, and went, the cousin lifting two fingers off the wheel without looking back, Sami’s hand flat on the open window. The dust took them too, east into the country that kept its names to itself, and then the road was empty in both directions and the wheatear flew up off its stone and was gone, and there was only Jakobus and the Beast and the long cross of dirt going four ways out of nowhere.

He stood in it a while. Let it be quiet. The echo of the city was still in him — the rose walls, the slot of the Siq with its two hundred metres of sky pinched to a blade, the clay joint sealed with lime that had held water against a desert for two thousand years because someone, generation on generation, had gone down into the dark and *kept* it. He had come for the postcard, same as Lena. He was leaving with

the cistern in his head, which was heavier and would last longer.

He climbed in, settled into the seat that knew him, felt the day's distances stack up in his knee and his back and the soft middle of him that had stopped pretending to be young.

In his hip pocket, among the worn crystals and the disregarded coins, the boy's stone sat where he'd put it that morning. He fished it out and held it up. A nothing pebble — banded sandstone gone smooth, rose and dun, the colours of the city laid down in a thing the size of a thumb-joint. The kid had pressed it on him with both hands and an enormous seriousness, the way you give a thing that is the most you have. *For the cistern*, he'd said, though it had nothing to do with cisterns. It had to do with being seen.

Jakobus turned it once in the light, felt its warmth come up to meet the warmth of his hand, and put it back in the pocket with the others.

He thumbed the shades up his nose, reached for the key, and the old straight-six turned over and caught with the deep, balanced growl that scared no birds because there were no birds left to scare. He patted the top of the dash, twice, soft.

"That'll do," he said. To the truck, to the road, to no one. "That'll do."

He put it in gear and chose the south fork, the one neither of them had taken, and drove off alone into a country he didn't know, which was the only direction that had ever fit him.

Chapter 14 — The Road Out

The south fork ran nine kilometres before he saw another made thing, and that was a culvert.

He liked the culvert. Somebody had laid it dry-stone under the new tar, the old way, so the wadi could move when the rain came and not take the road with it. He noted it the way he noted everything that worked. Then he was past it and there was nothing again — graded gravel turning to bad tar, the heat-shimmer standing up off the black like water that wasn't there, the country going wide and brown and indifferent on both sides as if it had never heard of a city eaten out of rock.

The Beast pulled the grade without comment. The four-two had its own opinion about hills, and the opinion was yes, always, in the same flat baritone. It was good to be back behind the paracord-wrapped wheel with nobody in the other seat needing a thing from him. He let the truck find its own pace. There was no destination with a name on it. There was Tariq's debt, somewhere south and east, and a man he owed a conversation — but that was days off, and the road between here and there was the whole of the job now. Going was the job. He'd take it.

He thumbed the remote without looking.

The bass came up under the seats first, the way it always did — a low pulse he felt in the soles of his feet before his ears clocked the rest, and his ears, what was left of the top end of them, mattered less than the part of him that listened through bone. Some Tuareg thing, guitar bending flat and patient over a beat that didn't hurry. He turned it up two bars. Then, because there was nobody to be decent for, two more. The cab went full. The mirrors trembled in their housings. A

wheatear lifted off a fencepost and was gone.

A heavy bassline was the only quiet he ever got, and he had it now.

His heart found the bar and slowed to it. He didn't think about that part; it happened the way breathing happened, the pulse pulling down to meet the beat, the road and the engine and the four-on-the-floor all telling him the same true thing — *you are here, you are moving, you can go* — and the freedom-wiring in him, the part that had screamed in the cage and gone cold at the man with the letter, lay down in the sun like a dog that owns the yard.

He drove. He let his mind do the thing it did when his hands were busy and his eyes were full.

The pump at Youssef's staff house — that one was clean. A seized impeller, and a man too proud to say the well had been dry an hour a day for a month. He'd freed it, shimmed the coupling, shown Youssef the trick of it twice and then a third time without being asked, because the third time is the one that sticks. Paid in tea and a wave-through that mattered more than the tea. Square.

The boy's stone he'd given nothing for, and that was the one that sat heavy. He took a hand off the wheel and found it in the vest pocket among the others — a flat pale sandstone disc, water-smoothed, the iron in it gone rose-dark on one face. Sami's nephew had pressed it on him at the door, solemn as a transaction, and Jakobus had taken it the way you take a thing a child has decided is important, which is to say completely. He'd send the prints. Lena would send the prints. That was a debt now riding north in a Hilux, and he trusted it the way he trusted the culvert: somebody had built it right.

Lena. He hoped her knee held. He'd told her, loading the gear — *ice it the second you can, then keep it moving* — and she'd looked at him with that flat exhaustion he'd come to read as respect by the end. She wouldn't sell the cisterns. She knew it and he knew it; nobody buys a photograph of a ceramic pipe joint sealed with lime two thousand years ago. But she'd carry the knowing of it, the way he was carrying it, and somewhere down the line it would change one frame she took of something else entirely, and that would be the cistern doing its work in a country it would never see.

Nobody photographs the keeping. Sami had said it at the second

cistern, dry, not bitter, and it had gone into Jakobus like a nail finding the stud behind the plaster.

The thing about the keeping was that it never finished. That was the lesson the whole rose-red city had spent forty hours teaching him, and he'd been slow — he'd wanted the Treasury, he'd stood in the Siq with the romance going up his spine like everyone else, before Sami had said, easy as anything, *it's a tomb, there was never gold in it; the gold was the rain*. He'd had to sit with being wrong, which he was getting better at the older he got. The marvel wasn't the face. The marvel was the dam scar up the wadi, and the settling basin, and the pipe sized exactly so the water ran open and slow and didn't blow its own joints apart. Patience cut into stone. A city that lived because somebody, every year, for centuries, went up and cleared the silt and checked the cement and *kept* the thing that kept them.

You could not buy that with money. The son spent money like he was angry at it, and it bought him nothing that lasted a season. The Nabataeans had spent *attention*, generation on generation, and the attention was still standing.

He understood maintenance the way he understood the boots on his feet. You don't replace. You resole. You go up the wadi again.

A glint in the mirror. He read it before he thought about it — vehicle, white, official paint, a steel boom and a man with a clipboard and the slack posture of someone three hours into a six-hour shift. The checkpoint he'd come through forty minutes back, behind him now and falling away. He watched the man lift the boom for somebody else and lower it, small and getting smaller, a made thing doing its job at the edge of all that nothing.

He hadn't needed the Voice or the cord or anything but the shades coming off. He'd lifted them onto his hair and let the man see his eyes — grey, gone greener as the truck idled and nothing was wrong — and handed across the papers that were one of the better sets, and said the three words of Arabic that were swallowed in the right places, the kitchen kind and not the radio kind, and the conscript with the clipboard had heard a man who'd learned them from people and not a book, and waved him through before the second sentence. *Sawubona*, done with the mouth. The whole of his trade in a glance returned.

He pushed the shades back down against the rising glare. The sun stood up hard over the eastern ridge, white and without mercy, and the first of it found the back of his neck through the open window. By noon the cab would be a kiln, and there'd be nothing in him for it — the cold he owned, the cold he'd take bare-armed in any highland dawn, but the still high heat of a desert at midday had no door he could open. He'd find the shade of an acacia when it came to it, drink water like a man paying a fine, and wait the worst of it out. The hessian bag wept on the flank, its quiet evaporation keeping the water inside cold while it looked for all the world like the truck was bleeding. The coldest thing he owned, earned by letting a little go.

That was Petra too, he thought. The zeer in the village, the seep on the canvas, the dam shedding half a flood to save a street. Pay a little, on purpose, to keep the thing alive. He'd known it in his hands his whole life, and they'd shown him a whole city built on it.

The ache in his knee had its own opinion about the eight hundred and fifty steps to the Monastery, and he let it complain. The back, too. He was fifty-seven and he'd carried a photographer's kit up a mountain on a bad joint, and his body would bill him for it for a week, and that was honest. You don't get the climb for free. You don't get the face without the legs. He'd resole. He'd go up the wadi again.

The Tuareg track ended and something with more bottom came on, a drone under it, a low rock thing with a didgeridoo breathing somewhere in the floor of the mix — a sound that didn't belong to this desert at all, a foreign continent's heartbeat threaded through his African road. He let it run, because it had been turning up in his mix for years, and one day he'd stand in the country it came from, and that was a thought for a different chapter of a man's life. He turned it up one bar. The wheatears were long gone. There was no one to scare out of the trees, and there were no trees.

He was alone, and the aloneness had two faces, and he held both without choosing. There was the ache of it — the table at Wadi Musa, the children, the bread torn and pressed on him, Sami's arms gone right round him heart to heart at the crossroads the way the dead one-armed hug never dared, and all of that going east now in another man's truck while he went south into country that owed him nothing. The warmth of being taken in, gone behind him like the boom in the mirror. And there was the freedom of it, the same thing from the

other side — the cab his own world again, the bass his own silence, the road his own to read, no one needing the careful dangerous quiet man to be anything but the one at the wheel. Both true. He'd stopped trying, a long time ago, to make them be one thing.

He patted the top of the dash twice, soft.

"That'll do, pig," he said, to the truck and to no one. "That'll do."

The road ran out ahead of him into the shimmer, and behind the shimmer there'd be a junction, and at the junction the man he owed a conversation, and after that another road and another wonder he hadn't earned the right to be wrong about yet. He'd carry the cistern into all of it. The patience. The maintenance bill. The lesson that the thing worth a life isn't the face cut in the cliff but the going-up-the-wadi, again, every year, forever, by people whose names nobody photographs.

He drove south, full of bass and quiet at once, and let the heat come.

Chapter 15 — Stone and Water

He stopped a second time when the light started to go.

There was no reason to, except that there was. The road ran south through a country that asked nothing of him and offered nothing back — a low, fawn-coloured emptiness, ridge after broken ridge going purple at the edges, the highway a grey suture across it. No town. No fences. A single power line marching off toward Ma'an, the cables slack between poles, humming a note too low to hear. He pulled the Beast onto the gravel shoulder, killed the music, let the engine idle.

A careful man would have read this place as nowhere. Jakobus had spent enough of his life in places like it to know it was the opposite. Emptiness only frightened you if you didn't know where you stood in it. He knew. The sun was where it should be. The ridges lined up. Two hundred kilometres back was a slot in the rock and a city eaten out of sandstone; ahead, a man in Aqaba he owed a conversation, and after that the sea. He was not lost. He had not been lost in a long time, and the few times he had, it had not been geography that did it.

He got out. The knee told him about it — a flat, honest complaint with nothing in it but the truth of eight hundred and fifty steps down a mountain the day before. He stood by the open door and let it settle. The air was cooling fast the way desert air does, the heat leaving the ground in one long exhale.

He set up the pot on the tailgate.

This was the one thing he would not skip — had not skipped in more

years than he wanted to count. The little screw-together pot, the battered hand grinder, beans carried since Amman and ground now by feel, the burner ticking blue under it. He'd made coffee in worse places than this and would again. The difference between a hard week and an unbearable one was whether you could make yourself one decent thing at the end of it. The pot knew that. He let it work.

While it heated he watched the sky.

It came on slowly, the way it always did and you always forgot — one star first, low and uncertain, then a second, and then the whole roof of it arriving at once, the band of the Milky Way unrolling like something poured. He'd seen this sky from a dozen deserts and it never wore thin, which was, he thought, its own kind of engineering. A thing built so well it didn't tire you.

The coffee came up. He poured it into the buckled enamel cup, dented soft as a stone, and held it in both hands, and the warmth went into his fingers, and he stood in the dark and the silence and was, for a moment, entirely content.

He thought about the city.

Not the Treasury. He'd wanted it to be the Treasury, that first morning; had walked the Siq with the rest of them and felt the want rise when the gorge opened and the rose stone stood there forty metres tall, and had been a little ashamed of how badly he'd wanted the romance of it — the hoard, the secret, the thing that would have made it special the cheap way. Sami had let him hold the want about four seconds and then taken it gently apart. *It's a tomb*, he'd said, not unkind. *A face. There's no gold behind it. There was never any gold behind it.* And Jakobus had felt the small clean snap of being corrected by a man who knew, and had been glad of it.

The city wasn't the face. The city was the water.

He thought about that now — the dams scarring the wadis above the town, the cisterns cut down into the rock, the ceramic pipe Sami had drawn from a basket in the staff house and laid in his palm like a relic. Wheel-thrown, the wall of it as even as a machine could manage, the male end of one segment shaped to lock the female of the next, the joint sealed with a lime so good it had held two thousand years in the ground. Fifteen centimetres of rain a year. Forty thousand

people. And the thing that made the difference between a desert and a capital was not stone — anyone with time and chisels could move stone — it was *attention*. Somebody had looked at where the rain fell, and where it ran, and how fast, and where it would kill you in a flood and where it would save you in a drought, and built the answer one segment of pipe at a time, and then somebody else had kept it, and somebody after them, and somebody after them. The city lived as long as people kept paying the bill, and died when they stopped.

He drank his coffee.

Nobody photographed the keeping. Sami had said that on the second day, dry, watching Lena swing her camera off a settling basin and back toward the tombs. Nobody photographs the keeping. It had gone in past the surface, the way a few things did. The whole place was a monument to the keeping, and the only part anyone came to see was the part that didn't need it — the dead face on the cliff, the promise cut so deep into the rock it would outlast everyone who ever loved it. The living part was the pipe, and the man who knew where the pipe ran, and the cousin who'd inherit the knowing. That was the marvel. That was always the marvel, in every place worth the road. People thought the wonder was that something had been *built*. The wonder was that something had been *kept*.

He'd fixed Youssef's pump at the staff house. A staff-quarters pump, a nothing thing — a cracked impeller, a seized bearing, and a man too proud to ask. Jakobus had read it in a minute and fixed it in twenty and been paid in tea, and that had felt more like belonging to Petra than the Monastery climb had. You don't honour a place by gawping at its corpse. You honour it by being useful to the people still alive in it.

The boy's stone was in the waistcoat pocket. He took it out and turned it in his fingers in the dark — a smooth water-worn pebble, banded, the kind of thing he'd have lifted off a Free State riverbed at nine for being beautiful instead of for being ammunition. Sami's nephew had pressed it on him the last morning, solemn as a transaction, and Jakobus had paid for it — a copper coin from the hoard, so the gift wouldn't cut, so the giving would hold. The boy hadn't understood the coin. He would, one day. You learn the small laws late or you learn them never.

He owed Lena prints — she was sending them north, to the nephew, for the family, the real ones and not the postcard ones, the cistern and the pipe and the keeping; she'd promised it and she'd do it, the want for the commercial shot burned out of her somewhere on the eight hundred steps. He owed Tariq a conversation he wasn't looking forward to. He owed a man in Aqaba an answer. Debts going out, debts coming in, the books never balanced and never meant to be. That was the keeping too. You don't pay the bill once. You pay it forever, or the thing dies.

The phone had two bars, against all reason. He thumbed a message to Sami — not many words; he wasn't a many-words man and Sami knew it.

Pipe held. Coffee good. Tell the boy his stone is on the road south, working. He looked at it, added: *I'll come back. Inshallah.* He let the word sit. It was the right word and it cost him nothing and meant something, which was the whole of how he tried to live. He sent it.

The Beast idled behind him, patient, the deep balanced note of the six going on and on, an animal content to wait. He finished the coffee, rinsed the cup with a swallow of water, shook it dry. Packed the pot. The cold was real now and his arms were bare under the waistcoat and he was fine, banked, warm from the inside the way he'd taught his body to be in another desert a long way east of this one. He stood one more minute and let the silence be exactly as big as it was. Out here the only sound was the engine and, under it, when he listened, the faint dry tick of the cooling ground and somewhere far off one bird saying one thing once.

You don't replace. You resole. You go up the wadi again, and you clear the basin, and you check the joint, and you do it the next year, and the year after that, until it isn't you anymore — it's the boy with the stone, and then it's his.

He got in. The knee complained. He let it.

He pulled the door shut and the desert went away behind the glass, and he put the truck in gear and let it roll back onto the road, the headlights opening a narrow lit room ahead of him in all that dark. He didn't turn the music up. He drove south, slow at first and then settling into the long even pull of a man with somewhere to be and time to get there, the cistern alive in his head, and the pipe, and the

boy, and the patience of stone, going on.

Chapter 99 — Notes, Sources, and Responsible Travel

This is a novel, and a novel lies for a living. But it lies about people. It does not get to lie about the ground.

So: what is real.

Petra is real, and it is more astonishing than anything I could invent, which is the trouble with writing about it. The Siq is real — a slot canyon a kilometre and more long, walls running up past sixty storeys in places, narrowing at the pinch to three men standing abreast. You walk it and the light does what it does and there is no trick to it; the sandstone was simply there, the gorge was simply cut by water over a longer time than anyone has names for, and the Nabataeans simply understood what they had been handed.

Al-Khazneh is real, and it is *not* a treasury. There was no gold in the urn at the top — the bullet scars are from people who believed there was. It is a tomb façade, some forty metres of Hellenistic-Nabataean stonework cut down into the cliff, and the chamber behind it is a chamber, not a hoard room. The popular name is a misnaming. I let Jakobus want the romance of the gold and then lose it, because that is what the place does to you if you let it: it takes the postcard out of your hands and gives you something heavier.

The water system is real, and it is the actual marvel of the book. Dams across the wadis to break the flash floods that would otherwise scour the city out in an afternoon. Hundreds of cisterns. Ceramic pipe

thrown on a wheel in segments, joined male-to-female and sealed, run as open channels by design to keep the pressure honest and the leaks down. Settling basins to drop the grit before the water reached a mouth. The American Society of Civil Engineers lists it as a Historic Civil Engineering Landmark, and it deserves the listing — a desert capital of perhaps thirty or forty thousand people, fed on fifteen centimetres of rain a year, kept alive because somebody owned the rain long enough to be patient with it. Nobody photographs the keeping. That line is the truest thing in the book.

The Monastery — Ad-Deir — is real: the long climb, the eight hundred and some steps, the largest façade of all and the same hollow patience behind it. Wadi Musa is a real town and a living one, not a diorama. Johann Ludwig Burckhardt really did walk into Petra in 1812 in the disguise of a Muslim traveller; the West called that a rediscovery, which tells you more about the West than about Petra, since the people of the place had never once mislaid it.

What is invented: everyone Jakobus speaks to. Sami al-Hadid, who out-reads him on his own camera-ready wonder and owns every word of the telling that matters — invented. Lena and her shot list. Youssef and his pump. Tariq’s debt and the man in Aqaba with the unanswered question. The checkpoint, the wedding night, the boy and his stone. All of it cloth, cut to fit a frame around true stone. Where the novel and the ground disagree, the ground is right and I was telling a story.

A short, honest table, the kind I owe you:

Real (you can stand on it)	Debated	Invented (I made it up)
The Siq, Al-Khazneh, the hydraulics, the Monastery, UNESCO listing, the ASCE landmark Nabataean construction, Roman overlay, the trade in frankincense and myrrh	Quarry methods for some façades; minor tomb dating; the full extent of what is still unexcavated The popular “treasury” legend as a folk misnaming	All personal names; the commission; the photographer; the guide’s family; every checkpoint incident The boy, the stone, the wedding

Real (you can stand on it)	Debated	Invented (I made it up)
Burckhardt, 1812	—	The cistern Jakobus is shown by hand
A city kept alive by water engineering	—	The conversation with Sami that I most wish were real

A word on the spine of this whole series, which I will say plainly here and never again so plainly anywhere else: the Nabataeans built Petra. Not visitors, not lost gods, not a vanished race that knew things we have forgotten. *People* built it — cleverer and funnier and more patient than the documentaries that go reaching for aliens whenever a brown-skinned ancient does something a narrator can't immediately explain. The reaching is the poison. It looks like wonder and it is the opposite of wonder: it is the refusal to credit a people with their own hands.

The defence against the poison is to show the work before you let yourself be amazed by it. The pipe segment first, then the marvel. The tool-marks on the wadi dam, then the awe. In the book, when Jakobus reads a thing right it is because somebody local showed him the physical evidence and let him follow it; when he reads it wrong — and he reads it wrong — a Jordanian custodian corrects him, dry and unbothered, the way you correct a man you have decided to like. The expertise in this story belongs to the people who never left the ground. Jakobus carries gear and fixes pumps and stands guard and pays for tea. He does not author the city's meaning. He is the road. The keeping was always theirs.

The B'doul and the related Bedouin communities of the area are real people, living now, who worked this ground as guides across generations and were resettled when the listing came. They are not backdrop, and I have tried very hard not to write them as backdrop. But trying is not enough, which is why every local name in this book is **provisional**, set down in pencil, awaiting a sensitivity read by people from the place before this goes to print. If a name or a custom or a turn of phrase here lands wrong, that is my error to fix on advice, and

it will be fixed.

If you go — and you should — go gently.

Hire the local guides. The official ones, and the ones whose families have walked the goat paths since before the buses. Pay them properly and listen more than you talk. Buy the tea. The site is wearing under more than a million feet a year, and the modern water it takes to keep that many people watered in a desert is a real strain on a place whose ancient water was so carefully kept; drink less bottled, refill, carry it out. Stay on the paths the park asks you to stay on. Do not climb the façades for a photograph. Do not perform anyone's sacred ground for content. Spend your money in Wadi Musa, in the town, with the people, and not only at the gate.

And when you stand at the Treasury with everyone else and the light is doing the thing the light does — turn around at some point and go find a cistern. Find the dam scar up the wadi. Find the broken throat of a ceramic pipe lying in a museum case looking like nothing. That is the marvel. The face was the promise; the water was the keeping. You don't replace a thing like that. You resole it. You go up the wadi again.

Sources (a partial debt)

Ortloff, C. R., *The Water Supply and Distribution System of the Nabataean City of Petra* (Cambridge Archaeological Journal, 2005). The ASCE Historic Civil Engineering Landmark documentation for the Petra water system. *Hydraulic Engineering at Nabataean Petra* (MDPI Water, 2020). The UNESCO World Heritage listing for Petra (1985). nabataea.net, for the field synthesis on the water works, cross-checked against Ortloff. And the long literature of guides and travellers since Burckhardt, who got there first among the writing-down kind and was not, by a very long way, there first.

Everything right in here, I owe to them. Everything invented, I owe to you, and have tried to label.

— *for the people who kept the rain.*

