

Sand Storm

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Extract

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FIRE AND RAIN

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NOVEMBER 14, 01:33 A.M.
THE BRITISH MUSEUM
LONDON, ENGLAND

HARRY MASTERSON would be dead in thirteen minutes.

If he had known this, he would've smoked his last cigarette down to the filter. Instead he stamped out the fag after only three drags and waved the cloud from around his face. If he was caught smoking outside the guards' break room, he would be shit-canned by that bastard Fleming, head of museum security. Harry was already on probation for coming in two hours late for his shift last week.

Harry swore under his breath and pocketed the stubbed cigarette. He'd finish it at his next break . . . that is, if they got a break this night.

Thunder echoed through the masonry walls. The winter storm had struck just after midnight, opening with a riotous volley of hail, followed by a deluge that threatened to wash London into the Thames. Lightning danced across the skies in forked displays from one horizon to another. According to the weatherman on the Beeb, it was one of the fiercest elec-

trical storms in over a decade. Half the city had been blacked out, overwhelmed by a spectacular lightning barrage.

And as fortune would have it for Harry, it was *his* half of the city that went dark, including the British Museum on Great Russell Street. Though they had backup generators, the entire security team had been summoned for additional protection of the museum's property. They would be arriving in the next half hour. But Harry, assigned to the night shift, was already on duty when the regular lights went out. And though the video surveillance cameras were still operational on the emergency grid, he and the shift were ordered by Fleming to proceed with an immediate security sweep of the museum's two and a half miles of halls.

That meant splitting up.

Harry picked up his electric torch and aimed it down the hall. He hated doing rounds at night, when the museum was lost in gloom. The only illumination came from the street-lamps outside the windows. But now, with the blackout, even those lamps had been extinguished. The museum had darkened to macabre shadows broken by pools of crimson from the low-voltage security lamps.

Harry had needed a few hits of nicotine to steel his nerve, but he could put off his duty no longer. Being the low man on the night shift's pecking order, he had been assigned to run the halls of the north wing, the farthest point from their underground security nest. But that didn't mean he couldn't take a shortcut. Turning his back on the long hall ahead, he crossed to the door leading into the Queen Elizabeth II Great Court.

This central two-acre court was surrounded by the four wings of the British Museum. At its heart rose the great copper-domed Round Reading Room, one of the world's finest libraries. Overhead, the entire two-acre courtyard had been enclosed by a gigantic Foster and Partners-designed geodesic roof, creating Europe's largest covered square.

Using his passkey, Harry ducked into the cavernous space.

Like the museum proper, the court was lost to darkness. Rain pattered against the glass roof far overhead. Still, Harry's footsteps echoed across the open space. Another lance of lightning shattered across the sky. The roof, divided into a thousand triangular panes, lit up for a blinding moment. Then darkness drowned back over the museum, drumming down with the rain.

Thunder followed, felt deep in the chest. The roof rattled, too. Harry ducked a bit, fearing the entire structure would come crashing down.

With his electric torch pointed forward, he crossed the court, heading for the north wing. He rounded past the central Reading Room. Lightning flashed again, brightening the place for a handful of heartbeats. Giant statues, lost to the darkness, appeared as if from nowhere. *The Lion of Cnidos* reared beside the massive head of an Easter Island statue. Then darkness swallowed the guardians away as the lightning died out.

Harry felt a chill and pebbling of gooseflesh.

His pace hurried. He swore under his breath with each step, "Bleeding buggered pieces of crap . . ." His litany helped calm him.

He reached the doors to the north wing and ducked inside, greeted by the familiar mix of mustiness and ammonia. He was grateful to have solid walls around him again. He played his torch down the long hall. Nothing seemed amiss, but he was required to check each of the wing's galleries. He did a fast calculation. If he hurried, he could complete his circuit with enough time for another fast smoke. With the promise of a nicotine fix luring him, he set off down the hall, the beam of his torch preceding him.

The north wing had become host to the museum's anniversary showcase, an ethnographical collection portraying a complete picture of human achievement down the ages, spanning all cultures. Like the Egyptian gallery with its mummies and sarcophagi. He continued hurriedly, ticking off the various cultural galleries: Celtic, Byzantine, Russian, Chinese.

Each suite of rooms was locked down by a security gate. With the loss of power, the gates had dropped automatically.

At last, the hall's end came into sight.

Most of the galleries' collections were only temporarily housed here, transferred from the Museum of Mankind for the anniversary celebration. But the end gallery had always been here, for as far back as Harry could recall. It housed the museum's Arabian display, a priceless collection of antiquity from across the Arabian Peninsula. The gallery had been commissioned and paid for by one family, a family grown rich by its oil ventures in that region. The donations to keep such a gallery in permanent residence at the British Museum was said to top five million pounds per annum.

One had to respect that sort of dedication.

Or not.

With a snort at such a foolish waste of good money, Harry splayed his torch's spot across the engraved brass plate above the doorway: THE KENSINGTON GALLERY. Also known as "The Bitch's Attic."

While Harry had never encountered Lady Kensington, from the talk among the employees, it was clear that any slight to her gallery—dust on a cabinet, a display card with a smudge on it, a piece of antiquity not properly positioned—was met with the severest reprimand. The gallery was her personal pet project, and none withstood her wrath. Jobs were lost in her wake, claiming even a former director.

It was this concern that kept Harry a few moments longer at his post outside the gallery's security gate. He swept his torch around the entrance room with more than casual thoroughness. Yet again, all was in order.

As he turned away, withdrawing his torch, movement drew his eye.

He froze, torch pointing at the floor.

Deep within the Kensington Gallery, in one of the farther rooms, a bluish glow wandered slowly, shifting shadows with its passage.

Another torch . . . someone was in the gallery . . .

Harry felt his heart pounding in his throat. A break-in. He fell against the neighboring wall. His fingers scrambled for his radio. Through the walls, thunder reverberated, sonorous and deep.

He thumbed his radio. "I have a possible intruder here in the north wing. Please advise."

He waited for his shift leader to respond. Gene Johnson might be a wanker, but he was also a former RAF officer. He knew his shit.

The man's voice answered his call, but dropouts ate most of his words, interference from the electrical storm. ". . . *possible . . . are you sure? . . . hold until . . . are the gates secure?*"

Harry stared back at the lowered security gates. Of course he should have checked to see if they had been breeched. Each gallery had only one entrance into the hall. The only other way into the sealed rooms was through one of the high windows, but they were wired against breakage or intrusion. And though the storm had knocked out main power, the backup generators kept the security grid online. No alarms had been raised at central command.

Harry imagined Johnson was already switching cameras, running through this wing, bearing down on the Kensington Gallery. He risked a glance into the five-room suite. The glow persisted deep in the gallery. Its passage seemed aimless, casual, not the determined sweep of a thief. He did a quick check on the security gate. Its electronic lock glowed green. It had not been breached.

He stared back at the glow. Maybe it was just the passing of some car's headlights through the gallery's windows.

Johnson's voice over his radio, cutting in and out, startled him. "*Not picking up anything on the vid . . . Camera five is out. Stay put . . . others on the way.*" Any remaining words disappeared into the ether, fritzed by the electrical storm.

Harry stood by the gate. Other guards were coming as backup. What if it wasn't an intruder? What if it was just the

sweep of headlights? He was already on thin ice with Fleming. All he needed was to be made a fool of.

He took a chance and raised his torch. “You there!” he yelled. He thought to sound commanding, but it came out more of a shrill whine.

Still, there was no change in the wandering pattern of the light. It seemed to be heading even deeper into the gallery—not in panicked retreat, just a meandering slow pace. No thief could have that much ice in his veins.

Harry crossed to the gate’s electronic lock and used his passkey to open it. The magnetic seals released. He pulled the gate high enough to crawl under and entered the first room. Straightening, he lifted his torch again. He refused to be embarrassed by his momentary panic. He should’ve investigated further before raising the alarm.

But the damage was done. The best he could do was save a bit of face by clearing up the mystery himself.

He called out again, just in case. “Security! Don’t move!”

His shout had no effect. The glow continued its steady but meandering pace into the gallery.

He glanced back out the gate to the hall. The others would be here in under a minute. “Bugger it,” he mumbled under his breath. He hurried into the gallery, pursuing the light, determined to root out its cause before the others arrived.

With hardly a glance, he passed treasures of timeless significance and priceless value: glass cabinets displaying clay tablets from Assyrian king Ashurbanipal; hulking statues of sandstone dating back to pre-Persian times; swords and weapons from every age; Phoenician ivories depicting ancient kings and queens; even a first printing of *The Arabian Nights*, under its original title, *The Oriental Moralist*.

Harry swept forward through the rooms, slipping from one dynasty to another—from the times of the Crusades to the birth of Christ, from the glories of Alexander the Great to the ages of King Solomon and Queen Sheba.

At last, he reached the farthest room, one of the largest. It

contained objects more of interest to a naturalist, all from the region: rare stones and jewels, fossilized remains, Neolithic tools.

The source of the glow became clear. Near the center of the domed chamber, a half-meter globe of blue light floated lazily across the room. It shimmered, and its surface seemed to run with a flame of prismatic blue oil.

As Harry watched, the globe sailed through a glass cabinet as if it were made of air. He stood stunned. A sulfurous smell reached his nostrils, issuing forth from the ball of cerulean light.

The globe rolled over one of the crimson-glowing security lamps, shorting it out with a sizzling *pop*. The noise startled Harry back a step. The same fate must have been dealt to camera five in the room behind him. He glanced to the camera in this room. A red light glowed above it. Still working.

As if noting his attention, Johnson came back on his radio. For some reason, there was no static. "*Harry, maybe you'd better get out of there!*"

He remained transfixed, half out of fear, half out of wonder. Besides, the phenomenon was floating *away* from him, toward the darkened corner of the room.

The globe's glow illuminated a lump of metal within a glass cube. It was a chunk of red iron as large as a calf, a *kneeling* calf. The display card described it as a camel. Such a resemblance was dodgy at best, but Harry understood the supposed depiction. The item had been discovered in the desert.

The glow hovered over the iron camel.

Harry backed a cautious step and raised his radio. "Christ!"

The shimmering ball of light fell through the glass and landed upon the camel. Its glow winked out as quickly as a snuffed candle.

The sudden darkness blinded Harry for a breath. He lifted his torch. The iron camel still rested within its glass cube, undisturbed. "It's gone . . ."

"*Are you safe?*"

“Yeah. What the hell was that?”

Johnson answered, awe in his voice, “*A sodding lightning ball, I think! I heard stories from mates aboard warplanes as they flew through thunderclaps. Storm must have spit it out. But bloody hell if that wasn’t brilliant!*”

It’s not *brilliant* anymore, Harry thought with a sigh, and shook his head. Whatever the hell it was, it at least saved him from an embarrassing ribbing from his fellow guards.

He lowered his torch. But as the light fell away, the iron camel continued to glow in the darkness. A deep ruddy color.

“What the hell now?” Harry mumbled, and grabbed his radio. A severe static shock bit his fingers. Swearing, he shook it off. He raised his radio. “Something’s odd. I don’t think—”

The glow in the iron flared brighter. Harry fell back. The iron flowed across the camel’s surface, melting as if exposed to a wash of acid rain. He was not the only one to note the change.

The radio barked in his hand: “*Harry, get out of there!*”

He didn’t argue. He swung around but was too late.

The glass enclosure exploded outward. Stabbing spears pierced his left side. A jagged shard sliced clear through his cheek. But he barely felt the cuts as a wave of blast-furnace heat struck him, searing, burning away all the oxygen.

A scream lay upon his lips, never to be aired.

The next explosion ripped Harry from his feet and threw his body clear across the gallery. But only flaming bones hit the security gate, melting themselves into the steel grating.

01:53 A.M.

SAFIA AL-MAAZ awoke in a dead panic. Sirens rang from all directions. Flashes of red emergency lights strobed the bedroom walls. Terror gripped her in a vise. She could not breathe; cold sweat pebbled her brow, squeezed from her tightening skin. Clawed fingers clutched the bedsheets to her

throat. Unable to blink, she was trapped for a moment between the past and the present.

Sirens blaring, blasts echoing in the distance . . . and closer still, screams of the wounded, the dying, her own voice adding to the chorus of pain and shock . . .

Bullhorns boomed from the streets below her flat. “Clear out for the engines! Everyone pull back!”

English . . . not Arabic, not Hebrew . . .

A low rumble rolled past her apartment building and off into the distance.

The voices of the emergency crews drew her back to her bed, back to the present. She was in London, not Tel Aviv. A long strangled breath escaped her. Tears rose to her eyes. She wiped them with shaky fingers.

Panic attack.

She sat wrapped in her comforter for several more breaths. She still felt like crying. It was always this way, she told herself, but the words didn’t help. She gathered the woolen comforter around her shoulders, eyes closed, heart hammering in her ears. She practiced the breathing and calming exercises taught to her by her therapist. Inhale for two counts, out for four. She let the tension flow away with each breath. Her cold skin slowly warmed.

Something heavy landed on her bed. A small sound accompanied it. Like a squeaky hinge.

She reached out a hand, met by a purring welcome. “Come here, Billie,” she whispered to the overweight black Persian.

Billie leaned into her palm and rubbed the underside of his chin across Safia’s fingers, then simply collapsed across her thighs as if the invisible strings supporting the cat had been sliced. The sirens must have disturbed him from his usual nighttime haunting of her flat.

The low purr continued on Safia’s lap, a contented sound.

This, more than her breathing exercises, relaxed the taut muscles of her shoulders. Only then did she notice the wary

hunch in her back, as if fearing a blow that never came. She forced her posture straight, stretching her neck.

The sirens and commotion continued half a block from her building. She needed to stand, find out what was happening. Anything simply to be moving. Panic had transmuted into nervous energy.

She shifted her legs, careful to slide Billie onto the comforter. The purring halted for a moment, then resumed when it was clear he was not being evicted. Billie had been born in the streets of London, alley feral, a wild fluff of matted fur and spit. Safia had found the kitten sprawled and bloodied on the flat's stoop with a broken leg, covered in oil, hit by a car. Despite her help, he had bitten her in the fleshy meat of her thumb. Friends had told her to take the kitten to the animal shelter, but Safia knew such a place was no better than an orphanage. So instead, she had scooped him up in a pillow linen and transported him to the local veterinary clinic.

It would have been easy to step over him that evening, but she had once been as abandoned and alone as the kitten. Someone had taken her in at the time, too. And like Billie, she had been domesticated—but neither ended up completely tamed, preferring the wild places and rooting through lost corners of the world.

But all that had ended with one explosion on a bright spring day.

All my fault . . . Crying and screams again filled her head, merging with the sirens of the moment.

Breathing too hard, Safia reached to the bedside lamp, a small Tiffany replica depicting stained-glass dragonflies. She flicked the lamp's switch a few more times, but the lamp remained dark. Electricity was out. The storm must have knocked down a power line.

Maybe that was all the commotion.

Let it be something that simple.

She swung out of bed, barefoot, but in a warm flannel nightshirt that reached her knees. She crossed to the window

and twisted the blinds to peer through to the street below. Her flat was on the fourth floor.

Below, the usually quiet and dignified street of iron lamps and wide sidewalks had become a surreal battlefield. Fire engines and police cars jammed the avenue. Smoke billowed despite the rain, but at least the fierce storm had faded to the usual London weep. With the streetlamps darkened, the only illumination came from the flashers atop the emergency vehicles. Yet, down the block, a deeper crimson glow flickered through the smoke and dark.

Fire.

Safia's heart thudded harder, her breath choked—not from old terrors, but from newborn fears for the present. The museum! She yanked the blinds' cords, ripping them up, and fumbled with the lock to the window. She pushed the sash open and bent out into the rain. She barely noted the icy drops.

The British Museum was only a short walk from her flat. She gaped at the sight. The northeast corner of the museum had crumbled to a fiery ruin. Flames flickered from shattered upper windows while smoke belched out in thick gout. Men, cowed in rebreathing masks, dragged hoses. Jets of water sailed high. Ladders rose into the air from the back of engines.

Still, worst of all, a gaping hole smoked on the second floor of the northeast corner. Rubble and blackened blocks of cement lay strewn out into the street. She must not have heard the explosion or just attributed it to the storm's thunder. But this was no lightning strike.

More likely a bomb blast . . . a terrorist attack. *Not again . . .*

She felt her knees grow weak. The north wing . . . her wing. She knew the smoking hole led into the gallery at the end. All her work, a lifetime of research, the collection, a thousand antiquities from her homeland. It was too much to fathom. Disbelief made the sight even more unreal, a bad dream from which she would awake at any moment.

She fell back into the security and sanity of her room. She

turned her back on the shouts and flashing lights. In the darkness, stained-glass dragonflies bloomed to life. She stared, unable to comprehend the sight for a moment, then it dawned. The power was back on.

At that moment, the phone on her nightstand rang, startling her.

Billie raised his head from the comforter, ears pricked at the jangling.

Safia hurried to the phone and picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

The voice was stern, professional. "Dr. al-Maaz?"

"Y-yes?"

"This is Captain Hogan. There's been an accident at the museum."

"Accident?" Whatever had happened was more than just an *accident*.

"Yes, the museum's director has requested I call you into the briefing. Can you join us in the next hour?"

"Yes, Captain. I'll be there immediately."

"Fine. Your name will be left at the security blockade." The phone clicked as the captain hung up.

Safia stared around her bedroom. Billie thumped his tail in clear feline irritation at the night's constant interruptions. "I won't be gone long," she mumbled, unsure if she spoke the truth.

Sirens continued to wail outside her window.

The panic that had woken her refused to fade away completely. Her worldview, the security of her position in the staid halls of a museum, had been shaken. Four years ago, she had fled a world where women strapped pipe bombs to their chests. She had fled to the safety and orderliness of academic life, abandoning fieldwork for paperwork, dropping picks and shovels for computers and spreadsheets. She had dug herself a little niche in the museum, one where she felt safe. She had made a home here.

But still disaster had found her.

Her hands trembled. She had to grip one in the other to fight another attack. She fancied nothing more than to crawl back into bed and pull the comforter over her head.

Billie stared at her, eyes reflecting the lamplight.

“I’ll be fine. Everything’s okay,” Safia said quietly, more to herself than to the cat.

Neither was convinced.

02:13 A.M. GMT (09:13 P.M. EST)

FORT MEADE, MARYLAND

THOMAS HARDEY hated to be disturbed while he worked on the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. It was his Sunday-night ritual, which also included a neat snifter of forty-year-old Scotch and a fine cigar. A fire crackled in the fireplace.

He leaned back in his leather wingback chair and stared at the half-filled puzzle, punching the nub on his Montblanc ballpoint pen.

He crinkled a brow at 19 down, a five-letter word. “Nineteen. The sum of all men.”

As he pondered the answer, the phone rang on his desk. He sighed and pushed his reading glasses from the tip of his nose up to the line of his receding hairline. It was probably just one of his daughter’s friends calling to discuss how her weekend date had fared.

As he leaned over, he saw the fifth line was blinking, his personal line. Only three people had that number: the president, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and his second-in-command at the National Security Agency.

He placed the folded newspaper on his lap and tapped the line’s red button. With that single touch, a shifting algorithmic code would scramble any communication.

He lifted the receiver. “Hardey here.”

“Director.”

He sat straighter, wary. He did not recognize the other’s

voice. And he knew the voices of the three people who had his private number as well as he knew his own family's. "Who is this?"

"Tony Rector. I'm sorry for disturbing you at this late hour."

Thomas shuffled his mental Rolodex. Vice Admiral Anthony Rector. He connected the name to five letters: DARPA. *The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency*. The department oversaw the research-and-development arm of the Department of Defense. They had a motto: *Be there first*. When it came to technological advances, the United States could not come in second place.

Ever.

A tingling sense of dread grew. "How may I help you, Admiral?"

"There's been an explosion at the British Museum in London." He went on to explain the situation in great detail. Thomas checked his watch. Less than thirty minutes had passed since the blast. He was impressed by the ability of Rector's organization to gather so much intelligence in such a short time.

Once the admiral finished, Thomas asked the most obvious question. "And DARPA's interest in this blast?"

Rector answered him.

Thomas felt the room go ten degrees cooler. "Are you sure?"

"I already have a team in place to pursue that very question. But I'm going to need the cooperation of British MI5 . . . or better yet . . ."

The alternative hung in the air, unspoken even over a scrambled line.

Thomas now understood the clandestine call. MI5 was Britain's equivalent of his own organization. Rector wanted him to throw up a smoke screen so a DARPA team could whisk in and out before anyone else suspected the discovery. And that included the British intelligence agency.

“I understand,” Thomas finally answered. *Be there first.* He prayed they could live up to this mission. “Do you have a team ready?”

“They’ll be ready by morning.”

From the lack of further elaboration, Thomas knew who would be handling this. He drew a Greek symbol on the margin of his newspaper.

Σ

“I’ll clear the way for them,” he said into the phone.

“Very good.” The line went dead.

Thomas settled the phone to the cradle, already planning what must be done. He would have to work quickly. He stared down at the unfinished crossword puzzle: *19 down.*

A five-letter word for *the sum of all men.*

How appropriate.

He picked up a pen and filled in the answer in block letters.

SIGMA.

02:22 A.M. GMT

LONDON, ENGLAND

SAFIA STOOD before the barricade, a yellow-and-black A-frame. She kept her arms folded, anxious, cold. Smoke filled the air. What had happened? Behind the barricade, a policeman held her wallet in his hand and compared her photo to the woman who stood before him.

She knew he was having a hard time matching the two. In hand, her museum identification card portrayed a studious thirty-year-old woman of coffee-and-cream complexion, ebony hair tied back in an efficient braid, green eyes hidden behind black reading glasses. In contrast, before the young guard stood a soaking, bedraggled woman, hair loosely plastered in long swaths to her face. Her eyes felt lost and con-

fused, focused beyond the barriers, beyond the frenzy of emergency personnel and equipment.

News crews dotted the landscape, haloed by the spots from their cameras. A few television trucks stood parked half up on the sidewalks. She also spotted two British military vehicles among the emergency crews, along with personnel bearing rifles.

The possibility of a terrorist attack could not be dismissed. She had heard such rumblings among the crowd and from a reporter she had to sidestep to reach the barricade. And not a few cast suspicious glances in her direction, the lone Arab on the street. She'd had firsthand experience with terrorism, but not in the manner these folks suspected. And maybe she was even misinterpreting the reactions around her. A form of paranoia, what was termed hyperanxiety, was a common sequela to a panic attack.

Safia continued through the crowd, breathing deeply, focusing on her purpose here. She regretted forgetting her umbrella. She had left her flat immediately after getting the call, delaying only long enough to pull on a pair of khaki slacks and a white floral blouse. She had donned a knee-length Burberry coat, but in her hurry, the matching umbrella had been left in its stand by the door. Only when she reached the first floor of her building and rushed into the rain did she realize her mistake. Anxiety kept her from climbing back up to the fourth floor to retrieve it.

She had to know what had happened at the museum. She'd spent the past decade building the collection, and the past four years running her research projects out of the museum. How much had been ruined? What could be salvaged?

Outside, the rain kicked up again to a steady downpour, but at least the night skies were less angry. By the time she reached the makeshift security checkpoint that cordoned off access, she had been soaked to the bone.

She shivered as the guard satisfied himself with her identification.

“You’re clear to proceed. Inspector Samuelson is awaiting you.”

Another policeman escorted her to the southern entrance of the museum. She stared up at its pillared facade. It had the solidness of a bank vault, a permanence that could not be doubted.

Until this night . . .

She was ushered through the entrance and down a series of stairs. They passed through doors marked MUSEUM STAFF ONLY. She knew where she was being taken. To the subterranean security suite.

An armed guard stood watch at the door. He nodded at their approach, clearly expecting them. He pulled the door open.

Her escort passed her on to a new fellow: a black man dressed in civilian clothes, an undistinguished blue suit. He stood a few inches taller than Safia, hair gone completely gray. His face looked like well-worn leather. She noticed a gray shadow of stubble across his cheeks, unshaven, called from his bed most likely.

He held out a hard hand. “Inspector Geoffrey Samuelson,” he said as firmly as his handshake. “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

She nodded, too nervous to speak.

“If you’ll follow me, Dr. al-Maaz, we need your assistance in investigating the cause of the explosion.”

“Me?” she managed to force out. She passed a break room, crowded with security staff. It appeared the entire staff, all shifts, had been summoned. She recognized several of the men and women, but they stared at her now as if she were a stranger. The murmur of their chatter fell silent as she passed. They must have known she had been called in, but they didn’t seem to know the reason any more than she did. Still, suspicion was plain behind the silence.

She held her back straighter, irritation sparking through her anxiety. These were her coworkers, colleagues. Then again, they were all too aware of her past.

Her shoulders slumped as the inspector led her down the hall to the farthest room. She knew it housed the “nest,” as it was nicknamed by the staff, an oval-shaped room whose walls were completely covered with video-surveillance monitors. Inside, she found the room almost deserted.

She spotted the head of security, Ryan Fleming, a short but stout man of middle years. He was easily distinguished by his entirely hairless pate and beaked nose, earning him the nickname the “Bald Eagle.” He stood beside a lanky man wearing a crisp military uniform, including a sidearm. The pair leaned over the shoulders of a technician who was seated at a bank of monitors. The group glanced over to her as she entered.

“Dr. Safia al-Maaz, curator of the Kensington Gallery,” Fleming said as introduction. Straightening, he waved her over.

Fleming had been on staff since before Safia had assumed her position. A guard at the time, he had worked his way through the ranks to become chief of security. Four years ago, he had foiled the theft of a pre-Islamic sculpture from her gallery. It was this diligence that had won him his current position. The Kensingtons knew how to reward those who had done right by them. Ever since then, he had been particularly protective of Safia and her gallery.

She joined the group by the video bank, followed by Inspector Samuelson. Fleming touched her shoulder, his eyes wounded. “I’m so sorry. Your gallery, your work . . .”

“How much was lost?”

Fleming looked sick. He simply pointed to one of the monitors. She leaned toward it. It was a live feed. In black and white, she saw a view down the main hall of the north wing. Smoke roiled. Men, masked in protective suits, worked throughout the wing. A collection of them gathered before the security gate that led into the Kensington Gallery. They appeared to be staring up at a figure tied to the grating, a gaunt, skeletal shape, like some emaciated scarecrow.

Fleming shook his head. “The coroner will be allowed in shortly to identify the remains, but we’re sure it’s Harry Masterson, one of my men.”

The frame of bones continued to smoke. That had once been a man? Safia felt the world tilt under her, and she fell back a step. Fleming steadied her. A conflagration of a magnitude powerful enough to burn the flesh off the bone was beyond her comprehension.

“I don’t understand,” she mumbled. “What happened here?”

The man in military blue answered, “That’s what we’re hoping you can shed some light on.” He turned to the video technician. “Rewind back to zero one hundred.”

The technician nodded.

The military man turned to Safia as his order was carried out. His face was hard, unwelcoming. “I’m Commander Randolph, representative of the Ministry of Defence’s anti-terrorist division.”

“Antiterrorist?” Safia stared around at the others. “This was a bombing?”

“That’s yet to be determined, ma’am,” the commander said.

The technician stirred. “All ready, sir.”

Randolph waved her to the monitor. “We’d like you to watch this, but what you’re about to see is classified. Do you understand?”

She didn’t, but she nodded anyway.

“Play it,” Randolph commanded.

On the screen, a camera showed the rear room of the Kensington Gallery. All was in order, though the space was dark, lit only by security lights.

“This was taken just after one o’clock,” the commander narrated.

Safia watched a new light float in from a neighboring room. At first, it appeared as if someone had entered, bearing aloft a lantern. But it soon became clear that the source of light moved on its own. “What is that?” she asked.

The technician answered, "We've studied the tape with various filters. It appears to be a phenomenon called ball lightning. A free-floating globule of plasma jettisoned from the storm. This is the first time in history one of the bloody buggers has been caught on film."

Safia had heard of such lightning displays. Balls of charged air, luminescent, that traveled horizontally over the ground. They appeared on open plains, inside houses, aboard airplanes, even within submarines. But such phenomena rarely caused any harm. She glanced back to the live-feed monitor with its smoking charnel house. Surely this wasn't the cause of the blast.

As she pondered this, a new figure appeared on the monitor, a guard.

"Harry Masterson," Fleming said.

Safia took a deep breath. If Fleming was right, this was the same man whose bones smoked on the other monitor. She wanted to close her eyes, but couldn't.

The guard followed the glow of the lightning ball. He seemed as mystified as those in the room with her. He raised his radio to his lips, reporting in, but there was no audio with the footage.

Then the ball lightning settled atop one of the display pedestals, one holding up an iron figure. It fell across it and winked out. Safia winced, but nothing happened.

The guard continued to talk into his radio . . . then something seemed to alarm the man. He turned just as the display cabinet shattered outward. A moment later, a second explosion appeared as a flash of white, then the screen went black.

"Hold that and rewind four seconds back," Commander Randolph ordered.

The footage froze and reversed, frames clicking back. The room reappeared out of the flash, then the cabinet re-formed around the iron figure.

"Freeze there."

The image stopped, shuddering slightly on the monitor.

The iron artifact could be seen clearly within its glass display. In fact, *too* clearly. It appeared to shine with a light of its own.

“What the hell is that?” the commander asked.

Safia stared at the ancient artifact. She now understood why she had been called into this briefing. No one here understood what had happened either. None of it made any sense.

“Is that a sculpture?” the commander asked. “How long has it been there?”

Safia could read his mind, the barely hidden accusation. Had someone slipped a bomb into the museum disguised as a sculpture? And if this were true, who would be the one most likely to cooperate with such a ruse? Who but somebody on the inside? Somebody tied to an explosion in the past.

She shook her head at the questions and the accusations. “It . . . it’s not a sculpture.”

“Then what is it?”

“The iron figure is a fragment of *meteorite* . . . discovered in the Omani Desert near the end of the nineteenth century.”

Safia knew that the artifact’s history dated much further back. For centuries, Arabian myths spoke of a lost city whose entrance was guarded by an iron camel. The wealth of this lost city was supposedly beyond comprehension. Such were its riches that scores of black pearls were said to be scattered near its entrance like so much trash. Then, in the nineteenth century, a bedouin tracker led a British explorer to the place, but he found no lost city. What he discovered was merely a chunk of meteorite half buried in the sand that looked roughly like a kneeling camel. Even the black pearls were found to be just bits of blasted glass, formed by the heated impact of the meteorite into the sands.

“This camel-shaped meteorite,” Safia continued, “has been a part of the British Museum’s collection since its founding . . . though it had been relegated to the storage lockers until I found it in the catalog and added it to the collection.”

Inspector Samuelson broke the silence. "When did this transfer happen?"

"Two years ago."

"So it's been there quite some time," the inspector said pointedly, glancing toward the commander as if this satisfied some earlier quarrel.

"A meteorite?" the commander mumbled with a shake of his head, clearly disappointed that his conspiracy theory had not panned out. "That makes no sense."

A commotion drew everyone's attention to the door. Safia saw the director of the museum, Edgar Tyson, force his way into the security room. The usually dapper man wore a wrinkled suit that matched his worried expression. He tugged at his small white goatee. Only now did Safia wonder at his conspicuous absence. The museum was the man's life and livelihood.

But the reason for his notable absence soon made itself clear. In fact it followed at his heels. The woman swept into the room, her presence almost preceding her form, like a surge before a storm. Tall, a full hand span over six feet, she wore a full-length tartan overcoat, dripping water, yet her sandy-blond hair, cut to the shoulders, was dry and coiffed to gentle curls that seemed to shift with their own breezes. Apparently she had not forgotten her umbrella.

Commander Randolph straightened, stepping forward, his voice suddenly respectful. "Lady Kensington."

Ignoring him, the woman continued her search of the room, her eyes settling on Safia. A flash of relief. "Saffie . . . thank God!" She hurried forward and hugged her tightly, mumbling breathlessly in her ear, "When I heard . . . you work late so many nights. And I couldn't reach you on the phone . . ."

Safia hugged her back, feeling the tremble in the other's shoulders. They had known each other since they were children, been closer than sisters. "I'm all right, Kara," she mumbled into her shoulder.

She was surprised by the depth of genuine fear in the otherwise strong woman. She had not felt such affection from her in a long time, not since they were young, not since the death of Kara's father.

Kara trembled. "I don't know what I would've done if I'd lost you." Her arms tightened around Safia, both comfort and need.

Tears rose in Safia's eyes. She remembered another hug, similar words. *I won't lose you.*

At the age of four, Safia's mother had died in a bus accident. With her father already gone, Safia was placed in an orphanage, a horrible place for a child of mixed blood. A year later, the Kensington estate took Safia on as a playmate for Kara, put up in her own room. She barely remembered that day. A tall man had come and collected her.

It had been Reginald Kensington, Kara's father.

Because of their closeness in age and a shared wild nature, Kara and Safia had become fast friends . . . sharing secrets at night, playing games among the date and palm trees, sneaking out to the cinema, whispering of their dreams under bedcovers. It had been a wonderful time, an endless sweet summer.

Then, at the age of ten, devastating news: Lord Kensington announced Kara would be traveling to England to study abroad for two years. Distraught, Safia had not even excused herself from the table. She had run to her room, panicked and heartbroken that she'd be returned to the orphanage, a toy put back in a box. But Kara had found her. *I won't lose you*, she had promised amid tears and embraces. *I'll make Papa let you come with me.*

And Kara had kept her word.

Safia went to England with Kara for those two years. They studied together, as sisters, as best friends. When they returned to Oman, they were inseparable. They finished their schooling in Muscat together. All seemed wonderful until the day Kara returned from a birthday hunting trip, sunburned and raving.

Her father had not returned with her.

Killed in a sinkhole was the official story, but Reginald Kensington's body had never been found.

Since that day, Kara had never been the same. She still kept Safia close to her, but it was more from a desire for the familiar than from true friendship. Kara became engrossed in finishing her own education, in taking over the mantle of her father's enterprises and ventures. At nineteen, she graduated from Oxford.

The young woman proved a financial savant, trebling her father's net worth while still at the university. Kensington Wells, Incorporated, continued to grow, branching into new fields: computer technology platforms, desalination patents, television broadcasting. Still, Kara never neglected the fountainhead of all her family's wealth: *oil*. In just the last year, Kensington surpassed the Halliburton Corporation for the most profitable oil contracts.

And like Kensington's oil ventures, Safia was not left behind. Kara continued to pay for her education, including six years at Oxford, where Safia earned her doctorate in archaeology. Upon graduation, she remained under the employ of Kensington Wells, Inc. Eventually she came to oversee Kara's pet project here at the museum, a collection of antiquity from the Arabian Peninsula, a collection first started by Reginald Kensington. And like his former corporation, this project also prospered under Kara's mantle, growing into the single largest collection in the entire world. Two months ago, the ruling family in Saudi Arabia had attempted to buy the collection, to return it to Arabian soil, a deal rumored to be worth in the hundreds of millions.

Kara had declined. The collection meant more to her than money. It was a memorial to her father. Though his body had never been found, here was his tomb, this lone wing in the British Museum, surrounded by all the wealth and history of Arabia.

Safia stared past her friend's shoulder to the live-feed

monitor, to the smoky ruin of her hard work. She could only imagine what the loss would mean to Kara. It would be like someone desecrating her father's grave.

"Kara," Safia began, attempting to soften the blow that would come, to hear it from someone who shared her passion. "The gallery . . . it's gone."

"I know. Edgar already told me." Kara's voice lost its hesitancy. She pulled out of the embrace, as if suddenly feeling foolish. She stared around at the others gathered here. The familiar tone of command entered her demeanor. "What happened? Who did this?"

To lose the collection so soon after rejecting the Saudis' offer had clearly piqued Kara's suspicion, too.

Without hesitation, the tape was once again played for Lady Kensington. Safia remembered the earlier admonishment about the secrecy of what the footage revealed. No such warning was given to Kara. Wealth had its privileges.

Safia ignored the replay on the monitor. Instead she studied Kara, fearing how this might devastate her. From the corner of her eye, she caught the final flash of the explosion, and then the monitor went black. All during the viewing, Kara's expression remained unchanged, a marble relief of concentration, Athena in deep thought.

But at the end, Kara's eyes slowly closed. Not with shock and horror—Safia knew Kara's moods only too well—but with profound relief. Her friend's lips moved in a breathless whisper, a single word, caught only by her own ears.

"Finally . . ."