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Altar of Eden

Written by James Rollins

Published by Orion Books Ltd

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ALTAR OF EDEN

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An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 2010
by Orion

This paperback edition published in 2010
by Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-4091-1755-1

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers
that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and
made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging
and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to
the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

April 2003
Baghdad, Iraq

The two boys stood outside the lion's cage.

'I don't want to go inside,' the smaller one said. He kept close to his older brother and clasped his hand tightly.

The two were bundled in jackets too large for their small forms, faces swathed in scarves, heads warmed by woolen caps. At this early hour, with the sun not yet up, the predawn chill had crept down to their bones.

They had to keep moving.

'Bari, the cage is empty. Stop being a *shakheef*. Look.' Makeen, the older of the two, pushed the black iron gate wider and revealed the bare concrete walls inside. A few old gnawed bones lay piled in a dark corner. They would make a nice soup.

Makeen stared out at the ruins of the zoo. He remembered how it had once looked. Half a year ago, for his twelfth birthday, they had come here to picnic at the Al-Zawraa Gardens with its amusement park rides and zoo. The family had spent a long warm afternoon wandering among the cages of monkeys, parrots, camels, wolves, bears. Makeen had even fed one of the camels an apple. He still remembered the rubbery lips on his palm.

Standing here now, he stared across the same park with older eyes, far older than half a year ago. The park sprawled outward in a ruin of rubble and refuse. It was a haunted

wasteland of fire-blackened walls, fetid pools of oily water, and blasted buildings.

A month ago, Makeen had watched from their apartment near the park as a firefight blazed across the lush gardens, waged by American forces and the Republican Guard. The fierce battle had begun at dusk, with the rattle of gunfire and the shriek of rockets continuing throughout the night.

But by the next morning, all had gone quiet. Smoke hung thickly and hid the sun for the entire day. From the balcony of their small apartment, Makeen had spotted a lion as it loped out of the park and into the city. It moved like a dusky shadow, then vanished into the streets. Other animals also escaped, but over the next two days, hordes of people had swarmed back into the park.

Looters, his father had named them, and spat on the floor, cursing them in more foul language.

Cages were ripped open. Animals were stolen, some for food, some to be sold at the black market across the river. Makeen's father had gone with a few other men to get help to protect their section of the city from the roving bands.

He had never returned. None of them had.

Over the next weeks, the burden had fallen upon Makeen to keep his family fed. His mother had taken to her bed, her forehead burning with fever, lost somewhere between terror and grief. All Makeen could get her to do was drink a few sips of water.

If he could make a nice soup for her, get her to eat something more . . .

He eyed the bones in the cage again. Each morning, he and his brother spent the hour before dawn searching the bombed-out park and zoo for anything they could scrounge to eat. He carried a burlap sack over his shoulder. All it held was a moldy orange and a handful of cracked seed swept up off the floor of a birdcage. Little Bari had also found a dented can of beans in a rubbish bin. The discovery had brought tears to Makeen's eyes. He kept the treasure rolled

up inside his little brother's thick sweater.

Yesterday, a larger boy with a long knife had stolen his sack, leaving Makeen empty-handed when he returned. They'd had nothing to eat that day.

But today they would eat well.

Even Mother, *inshallah*, he prayed.

Makeen entered the cage and dragged Bari with him. Distant gunfire crackled in short spurts, like the scolding claps of angry hands trying to warn them off.

Makeen took heed. He knew they had to hurry. He didn't want to be out when the sun was up. It would grow too dangerous. He hurried to the pile of bones, dropped his sack, and began shoving the gnawed knuckles and broken shafts inside.

Once finished, he tugged the sack closed and stood. Before he could take a step, a voice called in Arabic from nearby, 'Yalla! This way! Over here!'

Makeen ducked and pulled Bari down with him. They hid behind the knee-high cinderblock wall that fronted the lion's cage. He hugged his brother, urging him to remain silent, as two large shadows passed in front of the lion's cage.

Risking a peek, Makeen caught a glimpse of two men. One was tall in a khaki military uniform. The other was squat with a round belly, dressed in a dark suit.

'The entrance is hidden behind the zoo clinic,' the fat man said as he passed the cage. He huffed and wheezed to keep up with the longer strides of the man in military fatigues. 'I can only pray we are not too late.'

Makeen spotted the holstered pistol on the taller man's belt and knew it would be death to be found eavesdropping.

Bari shivered in his embrace, sensing the danger, too.

Unfortunately the men did not go far. The clinic was directly across from their hiding spot. The fat man ignored the twisted main door. Days ago, crowbars had forced the way open. The facility had been cleaned out of drugs and medical supplies.

Instead, the heavy figure stepped to a blank wall framed by two columns. Makeen could not make out what the man did as he slipped his hand behind one of the columns, but a moment later, a section of the wall swung open. It was a secret door.

Makeen shifted closer to the bars. Father had read them stories of Ali Baba, tales of secret caverns and vast stolen treasures hidden in the desert. All he and his brother had found at the zoo were bones and beans. Makeen's stomach churned as he imagined a feast fit for the Prince of Thieves that might wait below.

'Stay here,' the fat man said, ducking through the entrance and down a dark set of stairs.

The military man took up a post by the doorway. His palm rested on his pistol. His gaze swung toward their hiding spot. Makeen ducked out of sight and held his breath. His heart pounded against his ribs.

Had he been spotted?

Footsteps approached the cage. Makeen clung tightly to his brother. But a moment later, he heard a match strike and smelled cigarette smoke. The man paced the front of the cage as if he were the one behind the bars, stalking back and forth like a bored tiger.

Bari shook within Makeen's embrace. His brother's fingers were clamped hard in his. What if the man should wander into the cage and find them huddled there?

It seemed an eternity when a familiar wheezing voice echoed out of the doorway. 'I have them!'

The cigarette was dropped and ground out onto the cement just outside the cage door. The military man crossed back to join his companion.

The fat man gasped as he spoke. He must have run all the way back up. 'The incubators were off-line,' he said. 'I don't know how long the generators lasted after the power went out.'

Makeen risked a peek through the bars of the cage door.

The fat man carried a large metal briefcase in his hand.

‘Are they secure?’ the military man asked. He also spoke in Arabic, but his accent was not Iraqi.

The fat man dropped to one knee, balanced the case on his thick thigh, and thumbed open the lock. Makeen expected gold and diamonds, but instead the case held nothing but white eggs packed in molded black foam. They appeared no different from the chicken eggs his mother bought at the market.

Despite his terror, the sight of the eggs stirred Makeen’s hunger.

The fat man counted them, inspecting them. ‘They’re all intact,’ he said and let out a long rattling sigh of relief. ‘God willing, the embryos inside are still viable.’

‘And the rest of the lab?’

The fat man closed the case and stood up. ‘I’ll leave it to your team to incinerate what lies below. No one must ever suspect what we’ve discovered. There can be no trace.’

‘I know my orders.’

As the fat man stood, the military man raised his pistol and shot his companion in the face. The blast was a thunderclap. The back of the man’s skull blew away in a cloud of bone and blood. The dead man stood for a moment longer, then flopped to the ground.

Makeen covered his mouth to stifle any sound.

‘No trace,’ the murderer repeated and collected the case from the ground. He touched a radio on his shoulder. He switched to English.

‘Bring in the trucks and prime the incendiary charges. Time to get out of this sandbox before any locals turn up.’

Makeen had learned to speak a smattering of the American language. He couldn’t pick out every word the man spoke, but he understood the message well enough.

More men were coming. More guns.

Makeen sought some means of escape, but they were trapped in the lion’s cage. Perhaps his younger brother also

recognized the growing danger. Bari's shaking had grown worse since the gunshot. Finally, his little brother's terror could no longer be held inside, and a quiet sob rattled out of his thin form.

Makeen squeezed his brother and prayed that the cry had not been heard.

Footsteps again approached. A sharp call barked toward them in Arabic. 'Who's there? Show yourself! *Ta'aal hnaa!*'

Makeen pressed his lips to his brother's ear. 'Stay hidden. Don't come out.'

Makeen shoved Bari tighter into the corner, then stood up with his hands in the air. He backed a step. 'I was just looking for food!' Makeen said, stuttering, speaking fast.

The pistol stayed leveled at him. 'Get out here, *walad!*'

Makeen obeyed. He moved to the cage door and slipped out. He kept his hands in the air. 'Please, *ahki. Laa termi!*' He tried switching to English, to show he was on the man's side. 'No shoot. I not see . . . I not know . . .'

He fought to find some argument, some words to save him. He read the expression on the other man's face – a mixture of sorrow and regret.

The pistol lifted higher with merciless intent.

Makeen felt hot tears flow down his cheeks.

Through the blur of his vision, he noted a shift of shadows. Behind the man, the secret door cracked open wider, pushed from inside. A large, dark shape slipped out and flowed toward the man's back. It ran low and stuck to the deeper shadows, as if fearing the light.

Makeen caught the barest glimpse of its oily form: muscular, lean, hairless, with eyes glinting with fury. His mind struggled to comprehend what he was seeing – but failed.

A scream of horror built inside his chest.

Though the beast made no noise, the man must have felt a prickling of warning. He swung around as the creature leaped with a sharp cry. Gunshots blasted, eclipsed by a savage wail that raised the hairs on Makeen's body.

Makeen swung away and rushed back to the cage. 'Bari!' He grabbed his brother's arm and dragged him out of the lion's cage. He pushed Bari ahead of him. 'Yalla! Run!'

Off to the side, man and beast fought on the ground.

More pistol shots fired.

Makeen heard the heavy tread of boots on pavement behind him. More men came running from the other side of the park. Shouts were punctuated by rifle blasts.

Ignoring them all, Makeen fled in raw terror across the bombed-out gardens, careless of who might see him. He kept running and running, chased by screams that would forever haunt his nightmares.

He understood nothing about what had happened. He knew only one thing for certain. He remembered the beast's ravenous eyes, shining with a cunning intelligence, aglow with a smokeless fire.

Makeen knew what he had seen.

The beast known as *Shaitan* in the Koran – he who was born of God's fire and cursed for not bowing down to Adam.

Makeen knew the truth.

At long last, the devil had come to Baghdad.