

‘THE CASPIC CONNECTION’

BOOK I

THE SEVENTH LOT

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PROLOGUE

“Greed?”
“Yes!”

“But if it annoys You so much, why did you create money?”

“I created it so that those who used their potential best would be able to accumulate enough wealth to escape the struggle for survival, and thus become free to contemplate me and the world I’ve created for them.”

“But that’s how it works, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes, but many humans, once they’ve acquired what they need, are turning it into a goal in itself: they start accumulating gold and silver that would have done more good if owned by others.”

“Forgetting about you and the world?”

“Yes, and about other humans.”

“But in the end, they will be able to create fantastic things; things that... Well, I can see you’ve got a problem with them, but then, they are only humans.”

“And I could at least to some extent forgive that they give in to greed...”

“I’m not, and I can explain...”

“But you doing it is inexcusable!”

“I’m not giving in to greed! I’m just using material things to get what I need: as a means to access all the lovely...”

“Your needs are all catered for.”

“They are not, and to be quite honest, it’s Your fault.”

“My?”

“Yes, your wealth-thingy has made human-women finding me much less irresistible.”

“And you should stay away from human-women – permanently.”

“Charm, good looks, power, and other natural qualities no longer count for very much.”

“You are starting to make me angry.”

“I’m the best there is, yet now human-women don’t desire me as they used to.”

“I am angry.”

“Not unless I can present them with gold or silver, or what can be bought for it.”

“You need to be taught a lesson.”

“Do not.”

“You need to change.”

“Karli, you are dead and I want to use your body.”

It was a clear yet echoing sort of voice and though it spoke to Karli as if from his inside, it didn’t feel as if it was his own.

“Karli, you are dead and I want to use your body.”

Assuming he had somehow been wrong about the origin of the voice, Karli tried to look for the speaker outside himself but as he tried, his eyes wouldn’t open. Strangely, it didn’t even feel as if he had any eyes. Wondering about the voice’s source and what had happened to his eyes, Karli realized something equally strange: though he ought to be pretty zonked, he didn’t feel as he normally felt the day after a drinking bout. Strangely, Karli didn’t feel any way at all.

Then the memories of last night – or rather, last evening, night and morning – started to return. *At least my memory still works.* Karli started to recall last night’s events and how the sun had just started to rise over the longhouse and the drinking bout when Ulf, Ansgar’s gigantic ‘Gladiator’, as was his wont, had tried to provoke. The giant of a man, by commenting on the somewhat sparse growth that covered parts – most parts, definitely most parts, and an ever greater part – of Karli’s jaw and cheeks. “I know I’ve seen that very same sparse hair-growth somewhere else, but I cannot for the life of the Lord remember where.”

“Karli, you are dead and I want to use your body,” the voice again echoed in his inside, but Karli decided not to answer it. *How could I be dead and think at the same time? That’s stupid!*

Prologue

Though Karli was the youngest at the drinking-bout, he had learned how to control his rage and even though more mead than ever before had flowed down his gullet, his lack of sobriety had not caused him to go berserk; he had refrained from making the challenge that the big man so enthusiastically had tried to provoke him into making.

When it came to single combat, Karli, despite his youth, was no spring chicken; on the contrary, he had trained its different elements since he was a toddler. First, he had trained with the boys his age but then – as eventually neither they nor the older could put up a proper challenge – with his father who had been a mighty swordsman. Finally, after his father's death, he had continued developing his skills by training with Magnus, their mighty slave that his father had captured, and today there was no doubt that Karli was by far the best fighter among those who had not yet traveled outside the realm of the Swede's lands, and Karli's prowess as a swordsman was one of the main reasons why he, despite his age, was allowed into the longhouse and the drinking bout.

However, Karli was still not fully-grown and Ulf, the man trying to provoke him into making a challenge, was considered to possess the best swords-arm among all of Birka's Vikings, and, at least according to Ulf himself, of all the men in the Swede's land.

That reputation alone was enough to make Karli dislike the man, and besides, Ulf had been known to run after Karli's widowed mother; Karli's mother was the most attractive widow in Birka, and Ulf had been only one of many with amorous intent.

And, as if that hadn't been sufficient reason for Karli to hate the man, Ulf a year earlier had converted to Christianity; a belief that Karli and his family resented as it was against everything that they and their family line believed in.

Ansgar – the Christian preacher: the shaved man who had converted Ulf and the man who sort of epitomized the entire threat of Christianity – had not commented on the behavior of Ulf, whom he used to refer to as his Gladiator. Ansgar had criticized Ulf neither for trying to provoke Karli into a challenge nor for mocking the name of Ansgar's own God: the so-called *Lord*. The shaven man's behavior had been strangely out of character, because Ansgar, though a Christian, would normally behave honorably enough, and according to his own strange but strict principles.

Karli had been about to point out the preacher's inconsistent behavior in front of everybody when suddenly a raven had flown into the longhouse and settled down to perch on one of the rafters where it piercingly stared down the hall. "I bet you a silver Kufic that my gladiator can kill that crow with one single throw," Ansgar had challenged his friend, the now converted Hövitsman Hergeir, smilingly tossing Ulf a stone. Both Hergeir and Ulf – the latter had failed to catch the stone, dropping it onto somebody's foot – had shown obvious signs of discomfort at the shaven man's challenge. Killing ravens was not considered a good thing among Vikings, or among any people who had been brought up in the belief that Odin was either the one true God or one of them.

That ravens were not to be killed, of course, was because one could never know for certain whether or not one of Odin's divine messengers – Huginn or Muninn – dwelled under its feathers. *Ulf's and Hergeir's faith in their new religion can't be all that strong*, Karli reflected, as he glanced at the huge man whom he suspected that he one day would have to kill.

"Now I remember where I've seen such a miserable hair growth before!" Ulf had suddenly pretended to recall. "It was between the lusty legs of a fallen woman!"

Karli didn't know what a 'fallen woman' was but he assumed it had something to do with the new religion in which 'falling' seemed to be an essential ingredient and something bad. That had been followed by smirks and laughs among those belonging to the small but rapidly growing Christian congregation, indicating that there was some more serious mischief afoot. Then there had been a few shouts of "Shame!" from Karli's supporters but after a short while, the prospect of a brawl had caused the drunken crowd to put its differences aside, at least for the moment.

"Challenge! Challenge! Challenge!" it shouted in virtual unison.

Time for me to leave.

The echoing voice spoke again, this time even louder than before, "Karli, you are dead and I want to use your body."

Again, Karli chose to ignore it.

Everybody at the tables except Ansgar – who had looked away, maybe so as not to show Karli his face – had looked at Karli, and an air of expectancy had started to permeate the hall. Sure, he had several friends there, Karli was popular, but the bottom line was that – apart from the fact that a brawl constituted the perfect ending to a good night's drinking – Karli

Prologue

was fatherless. He was fatherless – living alone with his young and attractive widowed mother, and a little sister – and the man who insulted him was just short of becoming a living legend.

Having lost his father Karli couldn't hope for much assistance, especially not against an opponent as formidable as Ulf: a man who had not a single scar on his face despite more than a dozen single combats. The same thing could not be said of Ulf's opponents; not one of them had avoided the big man's sword and though some of them had escaped the encounter without having their faces scarred, they all had ended up with their heads detached from their shoulders.

Odin, just give me a few more years to improve my strength and I promise I shall slay this Christian dog for both our pleasures, Karli thought to himself, as he turned away from the staring crowd to leave the bout and make for home.

Facing the other way, starting to leave, Karli found himself looking into the penetrating brown-golden eyes of the raven that had just arrived: it seemed to take an unnatural interest in what was happening in the longhouse, and especially in Karli himself.

“By the beard of the Lord, now I remember who those lusty legs belonged to...” Ulf had started.

Karli didn't need to hear any more; he had known precisely whom Ulf would allege those lusty legs had belonged to and Karli, instead of heading towards home, had reluctantly started to make his way towards the hanging oak where Karli would fight Ulf to what in all likelihood would be his own death.

I should have seen it coming and I should have left while there was still time... Why am I such an idiot?

Again, the persistent voice told Karli that he was dead and that it wanted his body, again louder than before, “Karli, you are dead and I want to use your body.”

Karli thought about telling it that every woman in Birka wanted his body, or maybe just to shut up but as the voice undoubtedly had a lot of power to it, he didn't, and instead he recalled what had happened next, up by the hanging oak.

Karli had been much more agile than Ulf and he had avoided his powerful opponent's first few attacks with less difficulty than he had expected. *If there's no more than this to him, I've got a chance.* As Karli continued, ever

more effortlessly, to avoid the big man's attacks, there had been growing murmurs in the swiftly growing crowd. The news of the combat – or 'envig' as it was referred to amongst the Swedes – was spreading fast as the people of Birka started to wake up. The murmurs had sounded ever more impressed – impressed by no other than Karli himself – and soon there had been voices of encouragement that had suggested he'd push forward rather than simply defend himself.

Karli successfully survived five more attacks before deciding that he now knew all that he needed to know about his opponent and that now the time had come for him to turn the table on the big man.

Karli had, again effortlessly, jumped over Ulf's low-slashing sword; he had done it twice already and by now he felt so comfortable with the maneuver that he decided to incorporate his first offensive move into it. As he jumped, lifting his legs high beneath him – a good thing, as Ulf's sword slashed much higher than the previous times – Karli twisted around in the air. As he did, he whipped his sword at his opponent's head with as much power as he the momentum of his body could cram out the rotational movement induced at the start of the jump.

Only the big man's helmet had saved his life, absorbing most of the impact but several teeth and a piece of gum had come flying onto the ground as the tip of Karli's sword sliced into Ulf's mouth to rip the left side of his opponent's mouth open.

Now you are Grin-Ulf and soon you'll be Dead-Ulf, Karli had reflected, being so delighted with himself that for a fraction of a second he had lost his focus. That short moment of exuberance had been enough because as he landed, the loss of focus was what had caused him to slip – to fail to take into account the full effects of the centrifugal forces at work and of his actions in mid-air – and fall to the ground.

A moment later, as he tried to bounce back up onto his feet, a sturdy boot belonging to a man twice his size had been planted into Karli's lower back, mercilessly nailing him onto the ground and breaking things inside his body.

Odin, why didn't you give me more time to improve? Karli had thought as he, in the corner of his left eye – in addition to the curious raven – could see Ulf's sword come down towards him at a speed and from an angle that ought to have separated his head from his shoulders.

Shit! So the voice is right.

Prologue

Once Karli had acknowledged that he was dead it didn't take him long to realize who the powerful voice must belong to; *Good thing I didn't tell Him to shut up.*

"So he got me?"

"He did; you had him all figured out but then you got carried away."

"That has always been my problem."

"I know."

"You do?"

"I do, and I know somebody else with the same problem."

"And you're sure I'm dead?"

"Absolutely."

"When at first you told me I was dead I didn't realize it was You who spoke."

"I know."

"Sorry if I didn't listen."

"That's all right."

"So you are the... Odin?"

"I have many names."

"But then can't you take my body whether I want it or not?"

"I can."

"So why don't you?"

"It wouldn't be fair."

"So you are always fair?"

"I try to; I try not to claim the bodies of those who do not want them to be claimed. You see, this is not something I do very often; I very rarely require expired bodies."

"But I like my body – every woman in Birka likes my body – what if I said 'no'?"

"Then I suppose we would have to barter."

"You would offer me gold and silver?"

"Money!" the voice exclaimed, now suddenly with terrifying anger, "Is that all you Vikings can think of! Money and material wealth are the greatest of all evils! It's what makes you forget about both Me, the One who has made you, the world I've created for you, and other people!"

"I didn't realize that... I'm sorry about... I mean suggesting... I mean money."

“Besides, you will need no gold and silver where you are going. Now, what is it you really want?”

“Well, my mother...”

“Much better. Your mother will die in the best house in Birka – her own, surviving her third husband – at the age of eighty-four, without ever having an ailment other than tooth-loss and a few colds.”

“Children?”

“And there will be no more childbirths.”

“My sister...”

“Your sister will marry a successful chieftain, then she will carry four sons and two daughters; her second and fourth sons will both be successful captains.”

“Ulf?”

“Don’t you think I’ve offered you enough?”

“You have, but what do you need my body for?”

“To place somebody in.”

“Another man?”

“I will not tell you.”

“Will I get it back?”

“Probably, but I can’t say in what condition, and it could well take more than a thousand years.”

“You are the maker of all mortal men and the decider of their faiths?”

“I am.”

“You’ve just offered to change the faith of my mother and sister, yet you know not what will happen to my body?”

“... Correct.”

“Then he who you want to give it to, cannot be a mortal man, because then you would have known what would happen to it, and whether or not it would return in one piece.”

“You are getting quite clever young Karli; one day I will have to put that to some use.”

“Didn’t you decide how clever I was to become?”

“No, I only provide a human with potentiality and a world in which to make the most of it.”

“Just tell me my body won’t be destroyed and you can have it.”

“I can tell you that no mortal man will destroy it.”

“Woman?”

Prologue

“Nor mortal woman.”

“Animal?”

“Nor mortal animal.”

“Will I be feasting at your high table even before I get my body back?”

“You will.”

“Can I drink mead without a body?”

“Not a problem.”

“Women?”

“I’m sure we can arrange something.”

“Then I accept.”

CHAPTER 1

*K*harijites' would have been superintendent René Roquefort's first thought, had he come across 'Armageddon's most likely cause,' as a clue in a crossword puzzle for a ten-letter word. *No, no crossword-writer would know enough about them to write that*, would probably have been his second. *United States, no that's twelve* could well have been his third. Roquefort preferred Americans to Kharijites but only as he preferred rapists to murderers.

"They've been in there for over two hours," Chang stated, "what are they up to?"

Roquefort glanced at the man next to him; he was nervously twining his very un-Chinese mustache. The jovial and eager-to-please Chinese had just consulted his Swiss watch – a very discreet gold and stainless steel Vacheron Constantin, from the late thirties or early forties – *Where did he get the money to buy a watch like that?*

"They are making sure the device gets fixed in the optimum position before activating the detonation mechanism."

Roquefort – middle-aged, mustached, and with a formidable knack of telling men's characters by simply looking at them – was the head of Interpol's counter-terrorism department and the chief of the European Union's Strategic Defense Against Terrorism in waiting. He looked a bit like one of the Dupont twins in '*Tintin*' which he felt was kind of funny, especially as he had once nearly lost his job for renaming his boss – whose name really was Dupont – Fouché. Today Fouché – still Roquefort's boss but now also his best friend, was moving up in the world, and Roquefort was following, this time expecting to by stepping into one of Fouché's shoes within a couple of weeks: the EUSDAT shoe.

“It’s a nuclear bomb for Pete’s sake,” Chang replied, “do they have to be so fussy about it?”

“Probably not, but these guys do take their work quite seriously and they probably think they’ve got all the time in the world; which they actually have.”

Roquefort cast his mind back to his last chat with his boss.

“It’s time for you to get more intimately acquainted with the Kharijites; they are quite likely to be your main pain in the neck for as long as you’ll remain in the force, or on this planet for that matter,” Fouché had told Roquefort, before leaving for the Ministry of Justice where Fouché seemed to be spending most of his time these days.

Presumably, he’s growling at the outgoing Minister of Justice and preparing everything for his accession.

Chang, taking his cue from someone speaking into his earphones, nodded, “It’s activated!”

“Right.”

Roquefort disliked the Kharijites as much as Fouché did and the leader of this lot was an exceptionally unsavory specimen. The particular Kharajite that Roquefort was waiting to spot through his night binoculars was codenamed ‘K2.2.’ The first ‘2’ stood for ‘operative’ as opposed to ‘1,’ ‘3,’ ‘4,’ and ‘5’ that denoted ‘finance,’ ‘politics,’ ‘administration,’ and ‘religion’ respectively. The second ‘2’ stood for the fact that according to the Kharijites themselves K2.2 was the second most senior such operator.

Chang pointed out into the dark, “They are at the entrance.”

“It’ll take them a while to fill it all in and we want them well out of there, well away from it, before we move.”

Roquefort, though there were historical documents as well as ancient witness reports supporting it, didn’t believe in the existence of a K2.1. *Such a creature simply couldn’t exist.* Roquefort, therefore, thought of the Syrian who had just activated the nuclear bomb as the Kharijites’ most senior operative. That, in Roquefort’s view, made K2.2 the Kharijites’ most dangerous man and thus, talking operative agents, the most dangerous man on earth.

“There seem to be nine,” Chang stated, “I thought they operated in groups of eight.”

“Normally they do.”

“So why would there be nine?”

Chapter 1

“Don’t know, maybe they too feel they can use an observer.”

The ‘K’ of course stood for ‘Kharajite’ which was an old Arabic word that back in the seventh century A.D. had applied to a group of people who hadn’t liked the compromising nature of Hadrat Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. Ali had at the time ruled the Islamic world as the fourth and what was to turn out to be the last of ‘The Good Caliphs.’ Some Kharajite assassin – because of disappointment with Ali’s failure to press home his advantage in some battle he ought to be winning decisively – had stabbed the poor man to death and thereby put an end to all chances of a truly Islamic caliphate. At least that’s what Fouché had said, and Fouché was virtually never wrong.

“They are coming out now, and there really are nine.”

“Good.”

This time K2.2 was not going to succeed. The first mistake K2.2 – the dark, sharp-nosed, lean, martyr-faced and athletic Syrian who had just emerged out of the tunnel – had made was to assume that just because the Chinese weren’t as used to this sort of terrorism as some countries in the West, they would be less vigilant. *With a billion or so on the job market, it can’t be too difficult to find a few willing to spend their nights looking out for saboteurs.*

“What if they explode it?”

“Then we’ll die.”

“But they won’t do that?”

“All these guys want is to plant another blackmail device; detonating it now would be very much to their disadvantage. Even if we confronted them right now, they still wouldn’t try to explode it.”

“So why don’t we do that: confront them.”

“Because if we do, they will do just like they in the movies.”

“Hold up the detonator and ask for safe passage?”

“Yes, which you – as your minister in charge wouldn’t want to take what he’d perceive as an unnecessary risk – probably would be instructed by your president to grant them. Then they’d leave, bringing the device along with them.”

K2.2’s second mistake – well, K2.2’s organization’s mistake, sort of – was to go for something as well guarded as the Three Gorges Dam. If they had gone for something a little less conspicuous, they would have had a

much better chance of catching the Chinese off their guard. *Maybe they have, maybe they've already placed a dozen other devices.*

"So why don't we switch on the jamming device?"

"Because one, they would detect it; two, as long as the tunnel is unfilled there's a possibility that their signal could get through and that our wouldn't be strong enough to jam theirs; three, we have a winning strategy. Therefore, as long as we can keep everybody passive, quiet, out of sight, and prepared, there's absolutely no reason to worry."

Also, K2.2 had gone for a nuclear device rather than something biological or chemical. Roquefort could well understand that planting something that would allow the dam's water to break through its wall must appear much more attractive than using something that would only damage its waters. However, a device strong enough to shatter the mind-bogglingly strong wall of the Three Gorges Dam had to be pretty big, even if nuclear, and with increased size always came the increased risk of detection.

Roquefort looked through his binoculars: K2.2. was there, as well as a man who appeared to have a big scar across his cheek. The tunnel was being filled in quickly and Roquefort knew what would happen as soon as they were finished. The turf would be put back on top of the soil and then the men would engage in some rather advanced cosmetic landscaping. *First, they'll stitch the turf together with biodegradable thread to make it look seamless.* "I bet you five thousand against your watch that they've brought a vacuum cleaner."

"To remove away excess soil?"

"Yes."

"Sorry, but the watch is special."

Roquefort nodded, disappointed.

Chang looked at his French counterpart, "Will you enlighten me as to these Kharijites?"

"Enlighten me as to," and "For Pete's sake." This guy doesn't know how to say 'bonjour,' yet his English is better than most American graduates...' What is this world coming to?

The third mistake, though Roquefort figured K2.2 couldn't be blamed for that either, was to mess with a country that would ask for the assistance of Interpol that in turn would talk to Fouché who then would send Roquefort along as an observer. Also, this chap they'd given him to work with, Chang, seemed to know exactly how many peas made five.

Chapter 1

The Chinese had given Roquefort a virtual *carte blanche* from the very start. Then, when he had explained to the politicians that the device was likely to be an A – rather than a B or a C – the *carte blanche* had come to include a fair chunk of the Chinese military. “What do you want to know?”

“From where are they?”

Roquefort and Chang were not alone in their well-camouflaged observation hut; besides Chang stood five other binocoloured Chinese officers, observing and filming the Kharijites’ main device-planting unit’s every move. “They are here to learn from you,” Chang had explained. Roquefort – who had a knack for judging a man’s character by simply looking into his eyes – as he had looked carefully at the observers’ and in their eyes, had seen mainly huge amounts of intelligence mixed with an equally great desire to learn and understand. *These guys will become so incredibly good.* “K2.2 was probably born fifteen miles outside Damascus.”

“In Syria?”

Roquefort nodded, then he relaxed, leaned back, and looked up; there was an unusually cheese-like full moon making its way out of the dam and up onto the night sky.

“And why didn’t we blow them up before they activated the bomb.”

“One, because we want to catch them well away from the bomb; two, because we want to see how they’ve gone about placing it; three, because we don’t want to give them even a theoretical chance to detonate it, even if we are certain they wouldn’t; four, because we don’t want to give them a chance of using the bomb to ask for safe passage; five, because we want to catch them alive, six, because we want to learn what we can about the bomb itself and seven because we want to look for clues that can help us find other devices that are already planted.”

“Other devices?”

“Other devices that have already been successfully placed; unless we find these and dig them up, this planet will never again become what we once believed it was.”

“You said they would under no circumstances detonate the bomb?”

“They wouldn’t, but if we blew them to pieces too early, it could go off by accident, or a dying detonator-holder might opt to attempt to cut out a place for himself in the history books, or the Islamic paradise.”

“So why do we want to catch them alive; do you expect them to talk?”

“No – not a chance, mainly because they don’t know anything worthwhile – but by catching them alive we will be able to swap them for information as to the location of another device; one already successfully planted.”

Chang nodded thoughtfully, “But K2.2? He must know the location of other devices.”

“Maybe, but he cannot be made to talk.”

“Everybody can be made to talk. Here in China we...”

“Not him, you can take my word for it.”

One of the observers spoke to Chang in a language Roquefort didn’t understand.

Chang translated, “He wants to know whether the device – the one we will be given the location of – will be one planted in France or China?”

“Why don’t we leave that to our respective foreign ministries?”

One of the observers made a sign, “They are leaving.”

“Jamming,” Chang said, nodding to the observer who had asked about which location would be given.

The man flicked a switch over and then nodded back.

“On.”

Roquefort beckoned the men to follow, “Let’s confront them before they reach their vehicles.”

*

“This is Chang Wang of the Chinese Military Police speaking,” Chang spoke in a voice and in a manner that told Roquefort that his Chinese colleague, just like himself, was an admirer of Clint Eastwood.

Roquefort – though he, of course, would never say so in public – figured that God, in making Clint Eastwood an American, must have made either a mistake or a joke. If it was a joke – as he was inclined to think most of the time – Roquefort was convinced that it was directed towards himself personally. At the very same moment that Chang started talking, K2.2 and his men were floodlit by a huge number of distant ground vehicles that immediately started up their engines and began to approach the nine men.

Roquefort could hear the sound of Z-9A/B helicopters starting up in a distance and there were hordes of soldiers approaching along with the vehicles. *There must be at least ten thousand of them.*

Chapter 1

“You are surrounded, all routes out of here are blocked; aircraft and helicopters will prevent you from escaping by air and if you try to make it to your vehicles you will be shot,” Chang continued, this time sounding even more Clint-Eastwood-like than earlier.

The Kharijites number one device-planting unit didn’t try to put up a fight but as the men in charge of the arrest – Roquefort, Chang, and the observers – started to approach the nine men, K2.2, true to the script, pulled a detonator out of his pocket and turned towards his adversaries, “This is a detonator and if I was to press this button...”

Chang signaled his colleagues to stop, and he then continued forward to confront the group’s weasel-faced leader alone, “Please put it down; I will have none of that nonsense.”

“I don’t think you understand; what we’ve just dug down next to the dam wall is a nuclear bomb and the consequences of an explosion...”

“I repeat, please put it down or I will consider myself forced to have you shoot.”

“Have you ever heard of The Kharijites?”

“Have you ever heard of jamming?”

“I demand to contact the minister in charge of this operation.”

“As you are nothing but simple blackmailers this is not a political issue, and as you do not represent a threat our ministers have no interest whatsoever in this operation.”

“So who is running this; you?”

“Not at all, my colleague here is in charge; he’s from France.”

“Oh... I figured I saw a familiar face among your companions.”

Roquefort joined his Chinese colleague, “Good morning, caught again are we?”

“*Monsieur* Roquefort, we should have done away with you a long time ago.”

“Doesn’t your employer get tired of you getting captured all the time?”

“Not ‘all the time’, only very rarely, but congratulations on your upcoming promotion, I’m sure that will allow us to spend much more time together.”

“Unless you volunteer to dig up what you’ve dug down, I don’t think we’ll see much of each other at all. On the contrary, mister K2.2, I think that you and your group will spend the rest of your lives behind bars, Chinese bars unless they have you executed.”

“Not a very likely scenario, I’m sure my fan club in the West, including *Monsieur Fouché* – please congratulate him on my behalf to his portfolio – will see to it that we are released quite swiftly. Within a week... Would you like to make a bet of, say, a thousand euro?”

“Look out!” one of the observers suddenly exclaimed, pointing at a man breaking away from the small group and running towards the vehicles, “He’s escaping!”

As the man started to make his way towards one of the vehicles Chang pointed at him. “Stop that man; shoot him in his legs!”

“Don’t try to stop him!” K2.2 exclaimed, “He cannot be captured. Just don’t touch him and nobody will get hurt!”

The approaching soldiers hadn’t yet reached the scene but one of Chang’s observers managed to intercept the escaping man – who, strangely, wasn’t running very fast – just before he reached one of the vehicles: a large motorcycle.

“Stop him,” Chang instructed, “then bring him here.”

At that moment the escaping man gave the observer holding on to him a slap and the man, apparently with no or very little cause, collapsed to the ground where he remained motionless.

“Shoot him in the legs!”

The man straddled the motorcycle.

Several shots sounded from Chang’s men.

The man kick-started the bike and got it into gear.

Chang’s men continued shooting.

The man on the motorcycle, apparently unharmed, drove off towards the dam.

“Shoot to kill!” Chang shouted, and a couple of seconds later the approaching soldiers started to join in the barrage, “Show the punk, this ain’t his lucky day!”

The fire increased in intensity and though the motorcycle seemed to take several direct hits, the man riding it continued to make his way towards the dam, which was by now less than three hundred yards away.

“Grenades!” Chang shouted into his radio. “Give him all we’ve got!”

Submachine gun operators took the cue and soon the droning sound of grenades passing through the air above them joined the ra-ta-ta of the submachine guns. A hundred yards or so from the dam the bike quite

Chapter 1

literally fell to pieces under the man who tumbled to the ground together with the remains of the motorcycle.

Chang held up his right arm and the fire stopped, “An admirably persistent individual, but such heroics against the Chinese...”

The man, who had just had his motorcycle pulverized beneath him stood up, pulled down his trousers, and then turned his rear end to the observers, whereupon he... He then jumped up and down – several meters up and down – all while making obscene gestures.

Roquefort, Chang, and the observers, in amazement, beheld what was taking place. Nobody said a word.

Then the strong-legged man – in a surreally slow and leisurely manner – started to jog towards the dam.

“Kill him!”

Again, the cannonade started but as the man – if a man it was, and still as if in no particular hurry dived into the dam, now no more than fifty yards ahead of his pursuers – he seemed unharmed.

Roquefort shook his head in disbelief, *it cannot be*.

“There’s no sign of him, not a bubble,” radioed the first soldier to reach the spot where the escaping man had disappeared into the waters, “He’s gone!”

“He must be drowning, unless he had some closed system hidden down there,” Chang concluded.

It simply cannot be, Roquefort repeated to himself.

“Continue the jamming,” Chang instructed, “and get that bomb out of there quickly!”

“He’s nowhere,” reported the first soldier to reach the place where the fleeing man had taken a header, “He’s gone!”

“He must have drowned...” Chang said, mainly to himself, “Grenades into the water! Searchlights! Guards every fifty meters in each direction for a kilometer! If he surfaces, shoot to kill! Keep the grenades well clear of the dam wall!”

Roquefort shook his head while repeating to himself, *It cannot be*.

“Continue the jamming and see to it that that the bomb gets disarmed!”

The soldiers reached the observer who had collapsed when attempting to stop the escaping man from reaching the motorcycle. The observer still lay motionless where he had collapsed and a doctor from the medical corps went down on his knee to examine him, “He’s dead!”

Roquefort turned to K2.2 who was now being handcuffed together with the rest of his men, “Who was he?”

“Is.”

“He must be dead.”

“He’s not really into that.”

“What?”

“Dying, at least not until the third millennia.”

“Then who *is* he?”

“He?”

“She?”

“You should read up on us Kharijites; you’ll find some interesting stuff in the literature.”

“I have read, but I’ve never come across anything about *him*: not unless...”

“Unless...?”

“Are you serious...?”

“I am. Cool, isn’t it.”

“Why now?”

“It’s getting close.”

Roquefort didn’t answer.

*

“Personally, I do not believe there has ever been such a thing as a proper prophet,” Karl declared, looking out over his class, “but that, as stated, of course, is only my personal opinion.”

Johanna Larsson loved Lund and she knew that this was where she ought to be living. *A bit like Cambridge, only greener and more relaxed.*

Johanna was sitting at the back of the class, listening to Karl Nobel Junior – twenty-five years old, six foot five, half Swedish half Lebanese, son of a priest, fit as a fiddle, broad-legged and thumbs in his belt – lecturing on his pet subject: ‘The Quran as an Evolving Text.’ *If there had been such a thing as ‘Arab Vikings,’ then they would have looked just like Karl.*

“And why? That is the question we always must ask ourselves!” Karl exclaimed, nodding to his class as if he tried to convey something important, “Why is it important that texts such as the Sana Quran are full of palimpsests?”

Chapter 1

Nobody answered.

Johanna was a researcher too – or a research student, rather, as she yet hadn't presented her doctoral thesis – and she and the priest's son went way back; Karl had even been her sweetheart from three to six. Then the neighbor's son had introduced her to the pleasures of Marabou Daim bars, and she had swiftly turned the priest's son into an ex-sweetheart. *He was chubby then, fat even.* Karl had been nearly seven at the time and he had gotten over the dumping quite successfully. *Too successfully,* Johanna reflected, as she glanced over the class in front of her: three young men and more than twenty starry-eyed girls in their late teens or early twenties, *Much too successfully.*

Karl looked out over his class, "Do we all know what a palimpsest is?"

There were several nods.

Karl pointed at a tall, undernourished, blond girl with an overdeveloped upper body and eyelashes long enough to serve as excavation brushes, "Annette?"

"A palimpsest..." answered the girl, sticking one of her long naked legs out into the aisle, "is a text written over an earlier text, so that one of them is on top of the other."

"Very good, and why is it that palimpsests exist?"

The tall blond dumbo didn't have an answer. *They are even stupider than we used to be...* Johanna reflected, *and she's so cheap.*

The tall starry-eyed blond finally, and stupidly, repeated, "Why?"

Karl nodded.

Johanna had come down to Lund with her friend Frida and Lux, Frida's unnaturally obedient cat. They had come to do some research at the nearby University Library and to attend a seminar over in Copenhagen: 'Women and Power in Early Islamic Societies.' Frida had looked at her in disbelief when asked if she wanted to come along to attend the end of Karl's lecture. "He's a male," Frida had answered as if no further explanation ought to be required. Then Frida had turned to her cat, who was just about to raise its back leg against a lamppost, "Lux! Show Johanna what a good male looks like," Frida had exclaimed, snapping her fingers, "Good male! Good male!" Lux – who seemed to figure itself to be a dog, and who had been a male itself until Frida got him castrated – had rolled over to play 'dead cat.'

“Palimpsest exists because paper wasn’t yet available and because the writing material, therefore, was both hard to get hold of and costly,” Karl finally answered his own question, “are we clear about that?”

Again there were nods.

As the priest’s son would be driving to an annual art-glass auction in Kosta that was close to Växjö; the city where he and Johanna shared an office at the local university later in the afternoon, he had offered her a ride. “But I want five minutes of your expertise and your word of honor never to divulge a word about what I will reveal to you, and you have to get a ride from the auction with Mom and Dad,” he had said, “in return, I’ll only charge you for half of your share of the petrol.”

Johanna hadn’t asked which area of her expertise he expected to benefit from – she figured he had most of them pretty well covered – but she was looking forward to finding out. *Half of my sixty percent of petrol is a full six euros; this must be something big.*

“So now maybe we are ready to answer why the palimpsests in the Sana Quran are so important?”

Now there were several hands.

As Johanna had arrived at ‘The Slam’ – as the ‘Institution for Islamic Studies at the University of Lund’ was affectionately called – twenty minutes early, she had slunk into Karl’s lecture, and despite Karl’s dark looks, she had sat down at the back of the class. *If I had brought Frida, he probably would have thrown us out.*

“Annette.”

“Yes, doctor Nobel. Yes!”

“Why.”

“Because if there is one Quran-text written over another Quran-text...”

“Yes...”

“Sort of on top of the other and sinking deeeep into it...”

There were giggles from the girls and two of the three boys were shaking their heads in disgust.

“Go on.”

“Then there must be something that has been changed.”

“Why?”

“Because otherwise there would have been no reason for the old text to be washed away.”

Chapter 1

“Good Annette; you’re using that brain of yours better every time I see you.”

Johanna couldn’t see the girl’s face but she could virtually feel how it heated up. Karl was good-looking, Johanna couldn’t deny that, and girls had been running after him from the day she dumped him eighteen years ago. Actually, they’d been running after him even before that – even when he was chubby.

“Now, there could have been a dozen different reasons as to why they chose to wash away the old text and insert a new one on top of it; do I have any suggestions?”

“Spelling mistakes?”

“Maybe, but I’m sure you can do better.”

Karl had for a long time, it all started with his book on how to invest in Islamic texts, been regarded as ‘good material.’ But now, with his dissertation: *Reflections on Methodologies Used in Translations of The Quran 1900-2000*, the priest-son was moving on to a totally new level. At the age of twenty-five, he was metamorphosing from just another smart, good-looking youngster into a department-hero and a rising international star in the field of Quran-interpretation, and his behavior in front of his students had already started to reflect this.

Another girl – a brunette this time, again pretty in a cheap sort of way – raised her hand, “Eloquence?”

“Good, quite possible; any other suggestions?”

“They thought of something better to write?”

“Easy now, you’re getting way ahead of me.”

“New calligraphy?”

“Good.”

“Artistic embellishment?”

“Very good.”

“New orthography?”

“Excellent?”

“Language changes?”

“That’s a possibility, but now let me make a suggestion: what if God himself ordered the changes?”

There was silence.

“Or can’t you imagine Allah instructing some to us unknown seventh-century scribe – sorry, let’s make that some unknown seventh-century *prophet* – to do some editing?”

It seemed the consensus was that such a scenario was not very plausible.

“But yet, we do all realize that virtually every Muslim in the world acknowledges the Quran as the original and unadulterated word of God?”

Now there were nods.

“So, the fact that there are changes to the Quran – changes that are one hundred percent obvious and provable in the Sana Quran: additions, new formulations, new verse order, new orthography – doesn’t that show that these must have been ordered by God?”

One of the boys waved his hand to catch Karl’s attention, then he posed the question Johanna knew Karl was hoping for; “I can’t see why.”

“Because if these changes aren’t God’s handiwork – if they do not originate from His will – then the Quran couldn’t be what the entire Muslim world with one single voice says it is: the perfect, timeless and unadulterated word of God.”

The boy looked puzzled, as did most of the class.

“If it wasn’t God who ordered these changes...” Karl said, turning to the confused-looking boy, “then somebody else must have messed with the text and that messing must have occurred after Allah Almighty gave the Quran to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Or...”

There was a lot of confusion as the priest’s son left the question hanging, and sat down to make some notes.

Johanna had seen him do this before. *He actually is writing on something. It’s so weird. I wonder how he does it – and why?*

Immediately the class started to argue over what had just been said, and Johanna smiled her approval. *You’ve always been good at making people think; I grant you that.*

“If you are right,” Karl continued, after a minute or so of scribbling, again turning to the boy, “if the Quran isn’t the unadulterated word of God, then, many Muslims would say, the fourteen hundred-year-old struggle of Islam has been all in vain.”

Another boy pointed at the first boy, “Stone him!”

Johanna glanced at her watch, *Three minutes left.*

“Of course, you are right,” Karl continued, turning to the first boy, “the Quran is an altered text and it’s simply stupid to pretend it isn’t. And, it’s

Chapter 1

equally stupid to suggest that God is responsible for the alterations, because then God when He gave His last Prophet, Muhammad (PBUH) the first version, wouldn't have been perfect, and God is perfect by definition, or at least infallible; it says so both in the testaments and the Quran. However, and you mustn't forget that though it is true that the Quran probably is much less fiddled with – less than the testaments, the Tantras and practically all other old religious text – it has most certainly been fiddled with, and it's high time for the Islamic world to be made aware of the fact that its holy book indeed has been tampered with."

"Telling them truths like that," the boy replied, "doesn't sound like a good way of getting oneself popular."

"Well spotted and I'm aware of that. Acknowledging this fact will hurt a lot, initially, but soon there'll be great benefits to be reaped; benefits that will be far greater than that initial pain."

"Like what?"

"First, an end to Islamic fundamentalism."

"Why?"

"Because in the long run, even if some Christian groups yet haven't realized this, one cannot be a fundamentalist about a text that is not fundamental, at least not about a text that has been altered by non-fundamental humans. Second, there'd be an interest in the use of alternative filters when looking at the world; maybe filters like justice, compassion, honesty, progress, and love. Thirdly and indirectly, an end to the wicked kings and dictators who rule most of the Muslim world for the benefit of themselves, their families, America, and Western Europe."

"Wow!" the boy exclaimed, "Great stuff!"

"But there'll be more; there'll be integration into the world community as an equal partner; there'll be self-respect not sensed since the time of the Ottoman Empire; there'll be social and cultural development; there'll be explosive economic growth and there's a good chance that there'll eventually be some sort of democracy, as well as a new and cleverer capitalism than our own."

Johanna reckoned most of the class couldn't fully comprehend all of Karl's arguments, but they all looked seriously impressed. *A little international recognition, and it no longer matters whether people understand what one says or not.*

Karl looked out over his class, putting on an air of sagacity, that did not become him at all, “And with that democracy, can anybody tell me what would follow?”

The clock rang and a student left: the third boy.

“Freedom?”

“Precisely, freedom to practice exactly what one chooses to practice... like for example...” again Karl let the question hang.

The second boy answered without raising his hand, “Terrorism?”

Nobody even looked at him.

A shy-looking girl in a full veil raised her hand.

“Yes, Marie.”

“Islam?”

“You’ve found an excellent example – well done. They dragged us out of the Dark Ages and now it’s up to us to return the favor; now it’s time for us to help them out of their Dark Age so that they can get to their Renaissance and whatever comes with it; maybe a Reformation and a Counter-Reformation. Next week, Friday, sixteen hundred hours, and remember your homework: chapter six, eight, and nine of *The Changing Word of Allah*. That’s the same fat green book by Abd al-Haqq that you should have read for today. Mahmoud Abd al-Haqq – the same old man from Yemen who said no to a Nobel Prize and who supervised Mike Thorn – a very good book to read. If you had read it you would have known everything about palimpsests, the Sana Quran, and that sort of stuff.”

Johanna liked the passion with which the priest’s son spoke and she knew how dearly he wanted to access the photos of the Sana documents. However, that wasn’t a very realistic hope, because Karl, though a rising star in Quran interpretation, was too young and inexperienced, and he would have to wait at least a decade before he could hope to get his hands on the material from the Sana paper-grave. *He’d probably sell his sister, his parents, me, and Roman at auction in Nouakchott just to get an hour alone with those photographs.* Johanna was just about to address Karl when Annette, the long-legged blond, passionately grabbed him by the sleeve.

“Excuse me, Doctor Nobel, but why haven’t we heard about this Sana Quran before?”

“Could it be because you didn’t read Abd al-Haqq’s book for today’s lecture?”

“I mean besides that.”

Chapter 1

“Probably because the Yemen authorities are very secretive about it; they don’t want their fellow Muslims to learn that they’ve allowed the finds to be studied and photographed.”

“Is it still being photographed?”

“No, the researchers have finished that part.”

“But the researchers... or are they Yemenites too?”

“No, they are Germans, but they are even more secretive.”

“So you’ve never seen this Sana Quran?”

“I wish, but all I’ve seen are a few photographs and some fragments. And, it’s really much more than a single Quran.”

“I see.”

“But you, you were good in there.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what you’ve told me; about trying to think for myself, and not just stupidly accepting what others say: to think critically.”

“I hope you don’t intend to use that as an excuse for not reading Abd al-Haqq.”

“I will have read it by Friday – promise.”

“Good girl; I hope you are using it in your essay.”

“I’ll try to, and that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Yes?”

“We have an appointment on Friday?”

“We do, at half-past three.”

“But the thing is that I’m having a Latin exam just before; you wouldn’t have time after your lecture instead?”

“I don’t know, you see I’m...”

“Oh please, please Doctor Nobel, there’s so much I’d like to talk with you about, and I would so much like you to get on top of the situation.”

*

Fouché – a sagacious looking man in his early sixties, six foot seven, ten stones, a copybook ectomorph, and according to most French ministers a future president – was sitting in his friend’s well-guarded fifth-floor penthouse apartment in the very heart of Paris’s sixteenth arrondissement, glancing at the heavily loaded shelves that surrounded most of the library. *This place looks more like an antique dealer’s store every time I visit,*

Fouché thought, for maybe the hundredth time, *if the man had some taste, or if at least he would collect some proper antiques; he's worse even than Mitterrand used to be with his art deco clocks.*

Roquefort was rummaging around in a glass cabinet, "That's all; it simply felt wrong, and this time more than ever."

Fouché made a sweeping gesture at his host's collection of 20th-century art glass, "Can you honestly say that you like this stuff?"

"Returning their false passports, saying goodbye, and hoping we'd catch them the next time... No Sir! I didn't like that part one bit."

Fouché, alighting from his uncomfortable art deco chair, took down a surprisingly heavy four-armed glass-something in black, white, and clear crystal. "Now take this for example, don't you feel it's just a tiny bit... vulgar?"

"Be careful!" Roquefort exclaimed as he rushed to his sculpture's defense, "It's a unique 'Fantasia' from Flygsfors Glassworks in Sweden; I bought it on eBay just the other week."

Fouché handed his friend the weird sculpture, "But I've got some good news too."

Roquefort, carefully putting the unique piece back on its shelf, looked suspiciously at his boss, "What?"

"They gave it to us rather than the Chinese."

"The location?"

"Yes, and as we caught them with an 'A' they gave us a nuclear too."

"Where?"

"Here, right next to the Louvre; in the rubble foundations of a car park constructed in 1992."

"Could it be that they don't have any 'As' in China?"

"Maybe, or that they think – or, want us to think – that they've got so many here that they feel one less doesn't matter, or maybe that they are trying to make sure the Chinese won't ask for our assistance the next time. In any case, they probably want the Chinese to get annoyed with us – to sow discord."

"So there's one less, that's good, but x minus 1 means very little when one doesn't know the value of x . especially not when 'the 1' has been chosen for you; maybe the triggering mechanism was malfunctioning."

Fouché was looking at the man whom he for well over a decade had groomed to become his successor as the head of EUSDAT. The world was

Chapter 1

changing, and even though his friend might not be inch-perfect for the job, Fouché was happy enough with his replacement; Roquefort was the best choice. *But I cannot seem him as the Minister of Justice...* One time there had been an alternative – a Swedish analytic genius that unfortunately put his card-playing ahead of his police work – but that had been a long time ago. *How could a man who regularly gets bitten by his dog take on the Kharijites?* “No, it was fully operational.”

“Some more cognac?”

As his host replenished his glass, Fouché could sense it. *He will oppose me.* “True, we don’t know how many are already out there.”

“I’ve never opposed you.”

“Oh yes you have – several times, and more often than not quite successfully – and I don’t need your amazing talent to realize that you are about to do it again.”

“Those have all been minor things and you’ve always been right in principle; I’ve never doubted your superior vision or wisdom.”

Fouché’s real name was Dupont and that was what he’d been called until suddenly, one day, nearly three decades ago, everybody had started to refer to him as Fouché; initially only behind his back but soon ever more openly. Dupont had mercilessly tracked down the instigator of this unsavory and unwarranted nicknaming: it had turned out to be a young inspector by the name of René Roquefort.

Dupont, in the coffee room, in front of everybody, had instructed the culprit to report for traffic duty, permanent traffic duty, the next morning, thus in effect ending the young man’s promising career. However, at that moment the entire section, the entire anti-terrorist department at French Interpol office in Lyon – or at least those in the coffee room – had stood up for the young inspector. With one voice they had, quite silently so as not to offend more than necessary, repeated: “Fouché, Fouché, Fouché.”

He was popular then, and he never stuttered...

Dupont had taken his defeat – his first and only internal defeat in the organization that he by now in one way or the other had served for over forty years – as a man, and instead of firing the culprit, he had invited the young man to dinner. They had been friends – soon good, and later best – ever since, “Which is one of the reasons why you have always remained so dear to me, and why I have nearly always seen you as my successor.”

“Which I, of course, will remain grateful for until the end of my days.”

It was obvious to Fouché that his successor would not yield; he very rarely did, “But?”

“But are you sure that releasing them, especially K2.2, was in our best long-term interest?”

“If we had caught the creature that got away – the one K2.2 appears to think of as K2.1 – I might have agreed with you, but as we didn’t, yes. Considering all aspects of the situation I think that releasing them was, and will continue to be, in our best interest.”

“How many governments know about this; that they are planting blackmailing devices in our back yards?”

“With China now joining the club there are four countries that have caught them in the act but all of the world’s major countries have people with some understanding of what the Kharijites are up to and about; there are more than seventy countries with at least someone in law enforcement or the civil service who has some idea as to what is going on.”

Roquefort looked at his boss in a questioning sort of way that Fouché was all too familiar with, “Eh?”

Fouché turned to face his successor, looking straight at him. He knew that this would allow his friend to read his innermost thoughts and feelings. Fouché had spent endless hours, trying to acquire this knack, but with very little success. For his old friend, however, it seemed to come with no effort at all. *A useful tool in the interrogation room but a hard-to-handle one for making friends, or in love...*

“We need somebody to challenge them?”

Fouché didn’t answer but kept looking straight at his friend. *Yes, but you know very well that I can’t say that, Fouché thought, especially not as the Minister of Justice in waiting.*

“It’s the politicians who need to challenge them.”

Yes, my dear René, it’s the politicians who must challenge them, Fouché thought, but taking on the Kharijites is not the way for a politician to get elected and, unless it’s done in a very clever way, any such attempt is much more likely to produce bad stuff – chaos, discontent, new elections, civil war, and war – rather than a solution.

Is that why? Roquefort thought.

Yes, Fouché thought; he didn’t need to be psychic to sense that question coming; it stood written all over his friend’s surprised face, you should have figured that out long ago.

Chapter 1

“This is why you’re leaving EUSDAT? This is why you are going into politics?”

Yes.

“And this is what you’ve groomed me for?”

Yes.

“To be your right hand when you set out after these guys?”

Yes.

“You have created the entire EUSDAT as a tool for me... Just for me?”

“Why don’t we sample some of that ‘Premier Grand Cru’ before this goes to your head?”

“What?”

Fouché turned his eyes away from his friend, thus putting an end to their somewhat unusual conversation, “The cognac, you dimwit: the one you’ve been bragging about for the last month.”

*

Of course, the priest’s son had agreed to meet the long-legged dumbo after his lecture on Friday, just as Johanna had known he would from the very moment the girl had asked. However, rather than meeting her in his office, as the girl had suggested, he had arranged for them to meet in the library, something that would force the girl to construct some form of a seduction plan. Karl’s every word had told a story of reluctance and for a while, he had refused to change the time of their meeting. His body language, however, had told a different story and there was no doubt in Johanna’s mind as to what sort of exercises the priest-son would be engaging in on the evening of the following Friday, at least if the long-legged dumbo had things her way, “I knew you would agree to see her; why did you pretend you didn’t?”

“Did I, really?”

“You did indeed: the poor girl was virtually on her knees, begging.”

“Gets her juices flowing.”

“What did you just say?”

“Me? Nothing, was she really? I mean, eager to see me; I didn’t notice.”

“Anyhow, the way they set their cap at you; it’s disgusting.”

“Can’t really blame them, little darlings.”

“What do you mean ‘can’t blame them?’”

“I mean that if I hadn’t been me, and if I hadn’t discovered girls, and if then I had happened to come across *me*...”

“What are you talking about?”

“Then could you have blamed me if I had become a homosexual?”

“You are a seriously sad person.”

“Make that ‘such a seriously rich and good-looking, sad person.’”

“Rich?”

“I’ll get to that in a minute.”

“I hope you don’t go to bed with them.”

“Whom do you take me for?”

“A self-indulging sugar daddy with a predilection for dodgy antique deals and an unrealistic notion of telling the Islamic world what the Islamic world most definitely doesn’t want to be told.”

“Annette, whom I presume is the one you are referring to, happens to be twenty-three, and – on top of that, I mean in addition to that – an unusually well-developed twenty-three-year-old.”

“You mean apart from her chest?”

“Yes, and I am, as you’ve so often have pointed out, an unusually juvenile twenty-five-year-old.”

“You are definitely too old for her and it’s totally against the rules.”

“Now, talking about *old*; it’s time for you to earn your ticket to Växjö.”

“Half of my ticket to Växjö.”

“Remember that you’ve promised never to divulge a word about what I am about to reveal to you; not to anybody and that *anybody* especially includes your wicked father.”

Johanna had reconfirmed her promise and Karl had guided her out of the department, but rather than taking his car – a red two-liter Alfa Spider, struggling to make it to veteran status – he had walked her down past the University Library. Then he had stopped abruptly to look behind them, and not until he was certain that they weren’t followed, had he continued towards ‘Malmö Nation’. Its Friday disco was allegedly one of the priest-son’s favorite pick-up places.

Karl directed her into the botanical gardens, “In here.”

“I hope you’re not intending to give *me* a lecture about the birds and the bees.”

Chapter 1

“Don’t you worry; you’ve dumped me once and I’ve learned to live with it. And, quite honestly, I’m not sure I’d be capable of challenging the combined forces of Frida and her dog-cat.”

“What do you mean challenging?”

“Well, she does have a very pretty nose.”

“What are you thinking about Frida and me?”

“And besides, you’re way too old for me.”

“I’m nine months younger than you!”

“Not enough for an old sugar daddy like myself.”

Johanna followed Karl up some winding paths until her companion proudly pointed at a huge one-winged stone monster right in front of them, “What?”

“What do you see?”

“A sphinx, a late nineteenth or early twentieth-century copy of some Greek original; it used to sit on top of the university building until it started to break up.”

“And?”

“There were four, this one was presumably the one in best nick, so they placed it here in the park.”

Karl nodded.

“Was that what my expertise was called for?”

“You did a course on dating techniques, didn’t you?”

“You want *me* to teach *you* about dating?”

“Answer the question.”

“What?”

“Date it.”

“It’s cement. It’s because the irons inside the cement started to oxidize, causing it to break up, that they took them down; you can see the cracks and the metal reinforcements.”

“First, take a good look at where the wing has broken off and then at that little crack where the left breast ought to have been.”

A few minutes later Johanna had finished her examination and though it was a very preliminary such – and though she could see very little of the sculpture beneath the cement – it all pointed in one direction and one direction only; there was a real ancient solid stone sphinx beneath the layer of cement and the iron rods. He looked at her with his annoying ain’t-I-clever-smile.

“Well?”

“There are plenty of tests that will have to be done.”

“But?”

“And there are samples that will have to be sent for analysis.”

“But?”

“It’s amazing! But why has someone covered a real sphinx in cement?”

“Think.”

“To smuggle it out of Egypt?”

“Probably, or from somewhere else where export was difficult or expensive.”

“Wow!”

“Yea, pretty cool, isn’t it?”

“You’re going to be famous.”

“Correction. I am famous, now I’m going to be rich as well.”

Johanna, trying to look as if in utter disbelief, watched the man who less than half an hour earlier, with such passion and zeal, had described the West’s collective duty to repay its historical debt to the Islamic world and drag it out of its misery, “You’re gonna nick it?”

“Yep.”

“My father’s a policeman.”

“I know. Man’s worst enemy but since you’re my oldest friend I won’t hold that against you.”

“And you expect me, a police officer’s daughter, to just stand by and watch?”

“Unless you want in, but quite frankly I don’t think you could put up that sort of money.”

“Don’t be silly!”

“And don’t worry, technically speaking I won’t nick it; I’m just gonna replace it.”

“With?”

“With another modern copy that looks just like the modern copy that everybody thinks this is.”

“They’ll see the difference.”

“Not a chance, you see the copy will be placed here during the next carnival, and during that, some drunken students will paint it, and once the paint has been removed...”

“It’s still theft!”

Chapter 1

“Replacing a copy with a copy?”

“It is if you know that the first copy isn’t a copy.”

“I don’t know for sure.”

“You do!”

“And how could they possibly prove that, as long as you keep that pretty little mouth of yours shut?”

“I don’t have a little mouth.”

“Okay, your big pretty mouth.”

“What if you get caught?”

“What about it?”

“You would have to admit that you wanted to swap this sphinx for another.”

“I would.”

“And they’d discover that there’s an original beneath the cement.”

“Possibly.”

“Would you tell them that you didn’t know that this was real; that you had no intention of making any money from your swap?”

“I’m a passionate researcher; just ask my class. Passionate researchers don’t want to make money.”

“So how would you explain that you tried to swap them?”

“For a dare; I would say that I made a bet with Roman, that I could pull it off.”

“Roman? You intend to drag him into this?”

“Right, maybe not, so I’d say I made that bet with someone else; with you for example.”

“You’ll never make them believe that; your intentionality is theft and that’s what counts.”

“‘Intentionality?’ You close-read-guys you, always have to complicate everything. It’s a copy and I’ll replace it with another copy, and if they can’t tell the difference, then that’s their problem; that’s all there is to it.”

“You’re talking prison; grand theft or something.”

“Don’t you worry, I’ll get some expert advice before starting.”

“Helmut?”

“Don’t be silly, with this sort of money Helmut would happily cement me into the new copy.”

Karl's mother watched her husband showing an antique dealer something in the auction catalog. *Karl is late, why can't that boy ever be on time?*

Her husband was talking to what seemed to be an art glass dealer while shaking his head admonishingly.

He's asking him not to bid against us: quite unethical, especially as he's a priest.

The man, who was an art glass dealer, nodded resignedly.

But Karl is always late, and this time I won't nag.

Suddenly a familiar voice was heard from the loudspeakers, "We are running a few minutes behind schedule but in a moment or two we will be starting the auction."

It's Doctor Karl now, Doctor Karl Nobel; sounds so nice, so impressive. My little boy is a doctor, a doctor of theology. Thirteen languages and he's only twenty-five! Karl's mother reflected, feeling full of pride. But don't ever let him sense that.

Soon the familiar voice spoke again, "We are now ready to start the auction."

She looked at her husband who was trying to browbeat another glass-dealer into submission, all while waving his finger priestly as if threatening the poor man with purgatory.

"It isn't anything special," she could hear her husband say, "it's just that I collect metal encapsulated in glass and I can virtually promise you that it isn't silver."

'Collecting metal encapsulated in the glass!' Baloney! He's never seen anything like it before; he's such a cheat and what's even worse is that Karl is taking after him. Dealing in Islamic texts and fraternizing with that disgusting Helmut with greed and crime written all over himself – new money, parvenu, upstart, bad taste, no class, probably a real gangster and leading my little boy astray – off with his head!

"That's ridiculous!" Karl's father argued, "no true Christian would bid a thousand euro for that old lump, not even if it had been silver."

Karl's mother pulled up the centerfold to look at a picture of the auction's star turn. It was an old Orrefors masterpiece titled *Heaven and Hell*: an exquisite, richly engraved bowl but without the cogwheel-shaped dish that was designed to match it. *And I wouldn't be surprised if Karl's coming to bid for it, using that disgusting German's money.*

Chapter 1

“And with silver prices being what they are, who cares whether it is...” Her husband still hadn’t managed to convince the dealer who instead suggested they’d make a *ring* – organize themselves, so as not to bid against each other – to sell it among the ring members on a private auction after the official one. However, that her husband would not hear of, “That would be immoral, but if we simply don’t bid against each other, we could easily keep it below five hundred.”

“We?” He means ‘I’ and he doesn’t give a hoot about the poor seller who will receive less because of his antics.

“Mrs. Nobel, what a pleasant and unexpected surprise to find you here.”

Karl’s mother turned around to find that the man who had interrupted her train of thought was a journalist from ‘Växjö Daily.’

“I believed old Lebanese masks was your only antique-interest.”

“Old Arab masks, yes, it is, and I’m not here for your crystal, however magnificent, but Karl is coming up from Lund and I haven’t seen him since the dissertation and the dinner.”

“I see, and is there any particular piece that has caught our reverend shepherd’s fancy?”

“You have to ask him that yourself; he doesn’t want me to talk about his auction plans beforehand.” *At least there are only six lots before it, so if Karl would just come, we should be out of here pretty soon – and then I’ll have Johanna to keep me company.*

The journalist wasn’t finished with her, “What about Doctor Nobel Junior; is there any chance of him continuing to lecture in Växjö?”

“I wish, and he’s got an offer to stay on, either full or part-time, but he’s spending more time in Lund and then, of course, he’s dreaming about going to Oxford, where this Mike Thorn lectures.” *Where is the boy?*

“Is it true that he speaks thirteen languages?”

“It is.”

“Fluently?”

“Yes, he’s got a talent for languages.” *But I will never tell Karl he’s good. Keep him struggling; that’s how to make him strong.*

“Lot number one...” the auctioneer started and the journalist left, “is an Ariel vase...”

The auctioneer was a local boy of Finish ancestry whom Karl’s mother knew well. *He smokes a pipe; I like the smell of the tobacco, why can’t I recall his name?*

“... by Olle Alberius.”

Olle, poor Olle, I remember him so well. How old would he have been today?

Suddenly there was a voice from behind, and two strong arms pulled her against a hard chest. “Does a newly coroneted doctor have a chance for a date or are you still hanging out with that wicked old priest?”

“You’re late!”

“Doctors are supposed to be late, so from now on it will be legit; now how about that date?”

“You will never mend your ways, will you?”

“And you will never stop complaining about that, will you?”

“Lot number six is an engraved dish with flowers in orange and...”

“It’s coming up now.”

“What?”

“The reason we’re here.”

“Parental love is the reason you are here; you’ve come because I’m coming and because you are delighted to see me.”

“You think parental affection would bring Father all the way from Växjö.”

“I figured you talked him into it.”

“Not a chance; he’s here to shop, I’m here to see you.”

“Another monumental discovery destined for the gnomes of Zurich?”

“And don’t you poke fun at him; the last batch he sold netted us a €2,000 profit.”

“Still, it’s sort of demeaning; I mean with him being a priest and all that.”

“A profit of which, if I remember correctly, half went towards Dom Perignon for your graduation.”

“You’ve got a point. Go get them, Dad!”

“Lot number seven, by an unknown artist,” continued the auctioneer, “is a metal plate, possibly silver, with engraved decorative text, encapsulated in a block of crudely molded soda glass. Unfortunately, the piece, that carries an incorrect contemporary signature, is afflicted by glass disease; this makes the engravings into the metal virtually impossible to read. We guess that it is an experiment from Flygsfors made during the 1940s, in that case probably by Wilhelm de Moore. Do I have €200?”

Nobody expressed any interest at two hundred.

“Do I have €150?”

Chapter 1

Still nobody bid.

“So let me start this probably unique piece off at €100.”

Karl’s father nodded, raising his hand.

Karl looked at his mother, “Encapsulated silver? Flygsfors? 1940s and glass disease? What on earth is this?”

“I have no idea,” Karl’s mother whispered, “but he’s willing to go to three thousand.”

“Three thousand euros!”

“Quiet!”

The auctioneer pointed at her husband, “I’ve got one hundred.”

A lanky, pimply, obnoxious-looking, and red-haired teenager – who looked as if having no business whatsoever being at the auction – entered the bidding, “One hundred and twenty-five!”

“One hundred and fifty!”

Karl walked over towards his father.

The teenager wouldn’t give up, “One seventy-five!”

Karl put his arm around his father’s shoulders and shook his head as if trying to caution against further bidding.

Karl Nobel Senior, immediately taking his son’s cue, looked reluctant and hesitant. Finally, and then only after a long pause, as the auctioneer had given fair warning, did he raise his arm as if in a borderline last effort, “Two hundred!”

There was a short silence as the auctioneer turned towards the lanky teenager. For a few moments it seemed as if the boy was about to continue his challenge but that didn’t happen.

The auctioneer let his gavel fall, “Sold to bidder one seven three, for two hundred.”

Her husband – nearly running, and in a very un-priestly manner – made for the stage where he collected his purchase.

*

Karl was watching as the departing Volvo Estate as it speeded off towards Växjö with his parents and the glass-encapsulated metal plate. His father hadn’t even had time for a cup of coffee; not even as Karl had told him that Johanna was waiting in the cafeteria and then had offered to foot the bill. *Did Johanna go with them.*

“This, my dear boy, will net us tens of thousands,” had been his father’s departing words. Karl hadn’t even been allowed to have a peek. “You’d only start meddling. I’ll tell you when I’ve sold it if you’ve behaved in the meantime. Now go get yourself a Nobel Prize or something like that.”

He’s like a child but I suppose that’s what keeps him young.

“Lot number twenty-four is a Graal by Eva Englund, do I have €3,000?”

Karl looked in the catalog. Though his main interest – financially, academically, and as a writer – was in Early Arabic and Islamic texts, there was another string on Karl’s financial bow. Being brought up in Småland – the so-called ‘glass county’ of Sweden, with Orrefors, Kosta, and several other noteworthy glassworks – Swedish art glass had come as a natural second interest.

The fact that the Swedes for some unfathomable reason didn’t want to pay very much for their Orrefors art glass produced between 1925 and 1950 – the only thing the Swedes had undoubtedly been best at since the Vikings silver and woodcraft – allowed Karl to profit by finding foreign buyers, mainly in Germany, England, America, and Switzerland. There was an exquisite little Ravenna bowl with an early number that he would be able to make a profit from as long as he could get it for less than €3,200.

“Sold for €4,250.”

Then there was the main piece of the auction; an engraved masterpiece estimated at €50-60,000 – titled *Heaven and Hell* – that he was going to bid for. If Karl could get it for €30,000 or less, he’d buy it together with his friend Roman.

“Lot number twenty-five...”

Karl had a buyer for it, an American collector from Philadelphia who was prepared to pay \$90,000, but only if Karl could deliver the bowl together with its matching dish, which was where Roman entered the picture.

Roman, living in Orrefors where he was running a glass *cum* Internet business, knew the people – form-makers, blowers, cutters, designers, and engravers – who’d make them the new dish, and since dishes normally weren’t signed the American would have no way of knowing that he got a new dish rather than an old. *I won’t mention the matter and I might even accidentally make a few scratches to make it look older.*

“It’s an unusually attractive example...”

But it was unlikely that the piece would sell that cheap and the moment it went beyond thirty thousand, Karl would instead be bidding with

Chapter 1

Helmut's money, something that would make the German rather than Roman his partner. *The problem is that Helmut would expect me to get the dish without cutting Roman in, and if the American would back off, he'd probably kill me or at least insist on his money back, plus interest.*

"Three thousand one hundred, and I have two bidders."

Helmut Hegel – German, Arabic-text-dealer, upstart, antique fair manager, self-proclaimed Islamic-artefacts-expert, and aspiring socialite – regularly assisted in Karl's never-ending quest to access old Arabic texts. Without access to this source material – texts circulating outside the normal institutions, often with dubious provenance, as probably more often than not dishonestly come by – Karl's thesis wouldn't have received as much international interest and acclaim as it had.

Helmut, always very helpful, had actively sought Karl's company from the moment Karl, two years earlier, had published his well-received but somewhat mercenary book titled 'Islamic Texts as Investments'. Helmut – who took great pride in being seen with 'the right people' – had become even friendlier as Karl presented his thesis: 'my pal *Kalle* from Sweden' swiftly became 'my distinguished friend Doktor Karl Nobel, a much-acclaimed rising star in the world of Quran interpretations.' Helmut was also a notoriously dangerous man and in addition to that, he had, in Helga, a dangerously beautiful wife.

"Three thousand seven hundred from the lady in the front row."

Suddenly the crowd attending the auction could hear the sound of a police car's sirens.

Karl shook his head at the silly bidders. *If I had as much money or luck as I have good taste and ideas, I would have been a millionaire long ago.*

The sound of screeching breaks put an unceremonious end to Karl's ponderings and as he turned around to look, he found that it wasn't the police car that had done the screeching.

"Any advance on four thousand three hundred?"

The crowd's attention was now turning away from the auctioneer and towards the large black Mercedes that had come to a halt by the entrance to the auction-grounds: towards the people disembarking from it, and the police car that was now, with flashing sirens, approaching the Mercedes.

Karl was fit – his hobby was military pentathlon and before focusing on finishing his doctoral thesis he had been knocking on the door to the Swedish national team – so he recognized fitness when he saw it.

“Any advance on four thousand seven hundred?”

The men coming out of the car were all fit, extremely fit; it could have been the Swedish military pentathlon team, Karl reflected, though two of them looked as if of Arabic origin.

A raven landed on a birch tree right next to the Mercedes, where it settled down to perch on a branch from where it looked at what was going on, especially at Karl.

But so do I...

One of the men from the car – a dark, martyr-faced, Arab-looking man in his late thirties – approached the police officer who had now turned off both sirens and blue-lights; the other three spread out towards the parameters of the grounds.

“No more bids?” It seemed the auctioneer was the only one who wasn’t giving his full attention to the new arrivals, “Four thousand seven hundred first...”

The martyr-faced man was pointing at the police car’s video camera, apparently protesting, while presenting the officer with some document.

The policeman, after scrutinizing the document, switched off his video camera and left, all while shaking his head and looking uncomfortable.

Now even the auctioneer started to turn his attention to the new arrivals, yet he continued, “Four thousand seven hundred, second...”

Through the tinted windows of the car, Karl could see somebody moving, *There’s another guy in there.*

The martyr-faced joined the other three as they continued to spread out, now into a rectangle. Though they were a good thirty yards apart it felt as if the men were surrounding the auction and everybody attending it, and all five or six hundreds of them seemed to feel it.

A fifth man, this one in his mid-forties, emerged from the black Mercedes; again it was a man looking strangely – unnaturally even, considering his age – fit. Soon Karl had got a clear view of the fourth man’s face. There were a great number of small pockmarks covering each side of his face, *Mediterranean, probably Spanish or Italian, but he doesn’t look like a man who couldn’t keep himself from messing with his teenage pimples.*

As the man started to make his way towards rostrum and auctioneer, the crowd, very un-Småland-like, opened up to allow the newcomer through.

There was one large scar across the man’s right cheek above all the smaller ones. *I bet whoever gave him that got himself into a real stew.*

Chapter 1

The man was less than five yards away from Karl when *she* stopped him. The girl – twenty-five, slim, tall, timeless, clearly of Arabic origin, dressed in dark green colors and looking like somebody Karl had seen in the media – boldly blocked the path of scar-faced man, “Looking for something in particular?”

Not until now did the scar-faced man seem to notice the girl, “You!”

“Well spotted; no whiskey today.”

“So it is *it*.”

“You’re looking old; time for an MOT?”

“Where is it?”

The girl, nodding at the auctioneer, looked pleased, “You’re way too late.”

As the scar-faced man moved towards the stage the girl gave the young man, who was staring at her as if thunderstruck, a quick nod, indicating that he ought to leave.

The young staring man was in love; Karli Nobel had found the woman of his dreams and he started to approach her.

The scar-faced man turned to the auctioneer, “What number?”

“Twenty-five; it’s a lovely Graal vase by Eva Englund and the bid is four thousand seven hundred.”

The girl again signaled her admirer to go away.

The scar-faced man looked around, “It’s not here; I would have felt it.”

“You’re so sensitive; that’s what gives you that special *je ne sais quois*.”

The scar-faced man turned to the girl, “If it’s gone, then why are you still here?”

“Could it be that I like Swedish crystal?”

“Not very likely.”

“Very well, I admit.”

“What?”

“I’m here to distract you and to put you out of action for a while; while *it* gets out of your reach.”

“You watch it, bitch! You can’t challenge me with all these people around and I’ve got backup.”

“If you call K2.2. and those guys back up, you definitely need an MOT.

Karl saw his opportunity and he didn’t waver for a second.

The young man took a few steps forward and tapped the scar-faced newcomer on the shoulder, “Excuse me sir but I don’t think the lady appreciates your presence so if you wouldn’t mind toddling along...”

As the young man, soon identified as Karl Nobel Junior, awoke at the Växjö Hospital mortuary a few hours later, the doctors were astonished. The nurse in Kosta had sworn that their patient’s heart had stopped beating already at the auction, and though a tall dark girl very professionally had assisted in the attempts to resuscitate him, her efforts had all been in vain. The young man had been dead as a dodo when placed into the ambulance, yet now there seemed to be nothing even remotely wrong with him.

Two hours later Karl Nobel Junior sneaked out of the hospital ward, hitchhiked to Kosta where the auction had been held – *I wonder what happened to Johanna* – retrieved his Alfa Romeo Spider, and drove off towards Lund.

*

His energy was not what it once had been, which explained why he had not rushed off for a meal already. Unfortunately, though there was plenty of potential food all around him, none was of the easy-to-catch variety. The Old Male Tiger dozed in the shadows of the phoenix palms next to the quicksilver-colored river, one paw leisurely placed on top of the other. He looked longingly at the tree-bipeds, the deer, and the bees. Although this particular day he was not as starved as he was most of the time, he was still hungry, and he looked attentively at the food that surrounded him.

The tree-bipeds across the little channel were cutting down trees at a frenetic pace, and as soon as a tree fell to the ground, they removed its branches and dragged it down to the water’s edge. There were six of them: all but one were double-faced, and they all had sticks within an easy reach for most of the time. The Old Male did not fancy the idea of approaching the tree-bipeds, especially as there was no chance whatsoever of getting close enough to snatch one away without being detected well in advance. Apart from that, he feared biped faces – especially the double-faces, which could look in two different directions at the same time – and he hated the bipeds’ sticks just as much as he hated bees. In any case, The Old Male wasn’t normally into bipeds, and he wouldn’t kill one unless he was very

Chapter 1

hungry or happened to come across one that was alone and preferably stickless.

Instead, The Old Male turned his attention to the herd of deer that was grazing along the riverbank less than three hundred yards away. The herd was upwind from him and thus unaware of his presence, and amongst them, there were two small easy-to-catch deer-cubs. He could see neither scream-monkeys nor scream-birds between himself and the deer, and apart from one small opening, there was excellent cover between the place where he lay and to just a few yards from where the nearest of the deer were grazing.

However, apart from the small opening – and this was a big, *however* – the area where the herd was grazing did not belong to him but formed part of the neighboring domain. A domain belonging to a gigantic, and very noisy, tigress; she was nearly as big as him, and she was going into heat. The Old Male believed that he could deal with the tigress if he had to, so that was not the problem. He had taken food from her small but well-stocked domain on several occasions in the past, and he was prepared to do so again. The fact that she was going into heat, in itself, was not a problem either, and The Old Male could deal with the consequences of that too: actually, he preferred tigresses in heat to tigresses that were not in heat. The real problem was that where there were tigresses in heat, there would often be other male tigers who also liked tigresses in heat – tigers who were sometimes stronger, more aggressive, and younger than himself.

Especially, there was the fierce Dominant Male that The Old Male was wary of. He lived just north of the tigress' narrow domain, not at all very far from where The Old Male lay in leisurely contemplation of some of life's existential questions and the food surrounding him.

Another factor to consider was the fact that halfway between himself and the herd there seemed to be a bee-home, not far from where the tree-bipeds had taken away the trees to create a clearing in the forest. Bee-homes could sometimes be knocked to the ground and then – once one had run as fast as one could for the nearest water or mud, and once the bees had stopped chasing one – the honey that was inside the homes could be eaten. The Old Male liked honey very much; he liked it even more than deer, young wild boar, and biped backsides. Another good thing about honey was that it – unlike tigresses in heat, deer, young wild boar, and biped backsides – seemed to be of no interest to other tigers.

It might have been the prospect of young tender deer but it could equally well have been the bee-home or maybe even the fact that The Noisy Tigress was coming into heat that eventually tipped the balance. Whatever it was, it was enough to make The Old Male risk incurring the wrath of any suitors that happened to be lurking about inside the tigress' domain, even The Dominant Male.

The Old Male soundlessly, at least so he believed, made his way into the Noisy Tigress' domain. He carefully continued across a patch of mangrove and into the shadows of some trees. He then made for the phoenix palms that grew along the water. Having covered three-quarters of the distance, he found himself facing the only real problem: a small gap between the palms and the young trees on the other side of the opening. However, if he could just make it across unnoticed, he would be able to approach the herd from the perfect direction – from downwind, and through excellent cover – and, once across unnoticed, he would be virtually certain of catching at least a little cub. The Old Male crouched down and – again according to himself, without a sound – he started to make his way across the gap. He had hardly gotten his front paw out of the phoenix palms when he was detected.

“Ku! Ku! Ku!” the annoying bark of the deer sounded as they fled into the forest. “Ku! Ku! Ku!”

Bother!

“Ku! Ku! Ku!”

*

The Old Male decided not to leave the tigress's domain, on which he by now most definitely was an intruder until he had investigated the bee-home. He could see the bees bustling around the bee-tree, but the branches hid the bee-home itself, and The Old Male could not determine its exact position and thus whether or not it could be reached. Though there was lots of scent from The Noisy Tigress – she was in heat, all right – she was nowhere to be seen, and The Old Male carefully started to make his way towards the bee-tree.

Things looked quite promising as he approached the tree, but as he got close enough to see the bee-home, his hopes came to nothing. The bee-home – a big juicy home so full that the honey was dripping from it – was well out of his reach. It hung beneath a branch right next to the trunk more than twenty feet up, which was well beyond The Old Male's jumping capacity.

Chapter 1

Also, the tree was much too sturdy to be shaken, and there were no suitable branches to climb.

Bother!

It was as The Old Male sat longingly gazing up the bee-home that he heard the growl. It was not the growl of The Dominant Male, nor of any other male visitor, and it was not any other sort of “maybe-the-last-I-ever-get-to-hear” growl either, so survival was not an issue. Still, it wasn’t the “come-and-get-me” sort of growl that The Old Male would have preferred – he didn’t get all that many of those these days – yet it wasn’t a “get-out-of-my-domain-or-you’ll-regret-it” growl either. It was more sort of a “what-are-your-intentions?” growl, or maybe even an “are-you-sure-you-are-up-to-this?” growl.

There’s hope.

*

She had chased The Old Male away, of course, but not until she had given some clear signals that his presence was not perceived as a threat or in any other way unwelcome.

The next day The Old Male had come back.

She was not as frightened in The Old Male’s company as she would have been in that of The Dominant Male, or of some other young tiger’s. She and The Old Male went back a long time – even further back than to her previous litter that he had sired more than two years earlier – and she knew he would not sink his teeth into her unprotected throat once she turned it towards him.

To begin with, he had been just as forward as the previous day.

She had snapped at him during their second encounter too, though just for a little while, and soon they had stood nose to nose and she had shown him her desire. She had groomed herself in front of him for a long while, but, strangely, that had seemed to have no effect other than starting her own desire to rise. She had then approached The Old Male, licking him and rubbing up against his side but, again, with no effect.

Her suitor, who only a little earlier had approached her so forcefully, now seemed to take no interest in her whatsoever.

Then she had snorted at him and bitten him on his chest and his neck; not real bites but just small nibbles designed to arouse him.

However, nothing she did managed to stir her suitor into action.

Finally, she had rolled over on her back and waved her paws in the air, seductively.

That had done the trick, and finally, she had gotten The Old Male going.

There had not been all that much energy left in her suitor, not as much as there had been the last time, and somehow she felt that The Old Male might not be around to sire her litter the next time. Yet, there had been energy enough.

There will be cubs, of that the tigress felt certain.

*

As Karl's mother awoke, the first thing she noticed was that her husband was missing. The second thing she noticed was the little red light that blinked above their bed. Her husband had installed it less than a month earlier and supposedly it indicated that a door or a window had been broken, or 'compromised', as he insisted on calling it. *It's the third false alarm this week; why won't he let me employ a professional alarmist to install it properly?*

Karl's mother, silently giggling at the word she had so funnily misused, was just about to go looking for her husband when he returned, looking angry, very angry, and he wasn't alone.

"I'm a personal friend of Inspector Larsson! When he gets to hear of this..."

Two men in dark clothing were brusquely pushing her husband into the bedroom; there was a good foot and a half between them in height and she couldn't help but reflect that they looked quite comical, then a third man entered the room.

Karl's mother hadn't seen the third intruder before, or anything like it, not in reality – *A Majnun; it has stolen a man's body* – but she had seen its mask, and as she saw its face, she realized exactly what it had to be. She also realized that the only important thing left for her and her husband to do was to get it all over with as quickly as possible. *And in doing so we must reveal as little as possible.*

The third man instructed the tall and the short, "Make her scream of pain, and continue until he talks."

Chapter 1

Her husband inched closer to where a paper-knife lay atop Karl's investment-book, all while challenging the intruders, "If you as much as touch a hair on her head, I'll kill you!"

The tall man looked uncomfortable and reluctant, yet he grabbed her left arm, twisted it, and pressed it against the small of her back; then he put a knife to her throat.

The third intruder turned to her husband, "Now, old man, tell us or his knife will start to cut off that lovely throat of your Lebanese whore."

As Karl's mother threw herself forward, she jerked her head to the right, towards the knife's handle, and as she held on to hand holding the knife with her right hand she forced the blade to sever her jugular.

In the ensuing commotion, her husband pushed his elbow into the short man's face, wrestled himself free, grabbed a paper-knife from a nearby bookshelf, and trusted himself at the tall man.

The tall man tried to release his grip of her arm, attempting to move out of harm's way but Karl's mother held on to his other arm that still held on to the knife.

Her husband rammed the paper-knife into the tall man's face.

Karl's mother, weakened, had to let go of the tall man's arm.

The tall man screamingly reached for the paper-knife, now lodged in his pierced eye, thus inflicting even more pain on himself, screaming ever louder until reaching the point where his vocal cords suddenly and quite unexpectedly gave up.

As Karl's mother collapsed onto the bed, red bubbly blood flooded onto the frosty off-white linen; she started to feel dizzy.

The tall man, screaming out in soundless pain, was tumbling to the floor.

Her husband raised the paper-knife and turned towards the third intruder, "Though the Lord may have mercy on you, I won't!"

He's quoting British royalty without even knowing it: he's so clever.

There were two small thuds as the short man twice shot her husband through his heart and as his knees gave way he silently started to sink to the floor, his head turned to look at her with big, somewhat surprised and very worried eyes.

"You bloody idiot!" exclaimed the third intruder at the short man, "She has tricked you!"

As blood kept pumping out onto the bed, Karl's mother realized she had very little time left. *You brave, silly, greedy, wonderful man. You were the best thing that ever happened to me: you and Karl and Little...*

"What?"

"Bloody humans! So bloody easy for you."

"What did I do?"

"Can't you do anything right?"

"He would have killed you."

"Killed me?"

"Yes."

"Haven't you understood anything?"

"Well *us* then; he would have killed us."

"And what a terrible loss that would have been to your fellow humans."

"She's still alive, can't we question her."

"Don't be ridiculous."

If they leave soon, I could write something, just like they do in the detective novels, Karl's mother thought, as the men searched the bedroom.

"Now search the rest of the house until you find it."

My little Karli; you're not ready to meet this man...

"And take the valuables; make it look like a burglary. Take the art glass: that's valuable here."

Suddenly Karl's mother knew what to write.

