

Chapter 1: Sands of the Prophet

I am the scourge of God chosen

To Chastise you, since no one knows the remedy of your sin

Iniquity except me. You are wicked but I am more wicked

Than you, so be silent.

-Tamburlaine the Great, 1398

Saudi Arabia – Ten Years from Now...

Šahrāzād traversed the burning sands of the Prophet on a black Arabian stallion. Muscles working like pistons, the horse carried its royal owner up and down the shifting dunes of the land the Saudis called The Kingdom. With each step, the stallion's hooves sank into the dunes, and wind erased the tracks behind.

Golden sand whispered over the landscape, stinging the princess's skin. The grains themselves were like sugar or salt, dry and perfect. Here in the desert, it was not acts of man that shaped the world, but wind and sand alone. Both spoke to Šahrāzād now: *You have no choice. You cannot go back.* In addition to being the daughter of Saudi Arabia's king, Šahrāzād was also the chief financial officer (CFO) of Amarco—The Kingdom's state-owned oil company and the wealthiest corporation in the world. Despite her Harvard education, she was poorly prepared for what lay ahead.

It had been more than ten years since the Arab Spring, yet no spring had come to The Kingdom. That would soon change, she knew. Whether the change would lead to Renaissance or Dark Age, none could say. She endeavored to be a spark for political change. Having no desire to

be trapped by fate like everyone else, she longed for something more. She wished to be molded not by culture, but by the force of her own will.

The wind dusted sand across the veil covering Šahrāzād's face and hair. Looking up, she could see her falcon circling in the clear blue sky above. Aside from horse and falcon, she was alone in the desert. She looked at her watch, a gift from her father. Micro-Inscribed on the back was a reminder: "Time is all we have, the past is a memory and the future is ours to dream, yet the present slips past us."

She thought about her father's voice, and how it always tasted like liquid gold and honey. For as long as she could remember, she'd been able to taste sounds. *Synesthesia*, they called it. The peculiar gift, considered a useless curiosity by science, conveyed things to her that others could not perceive: whether a person who spoke was truthful or lying, arrogant or humble. The ability colored her perceptions and her memories.

She gazed up as the Saker falcon glided to her, flaring its wings and wrapping its black razor talons around her leather gauntlet. The bird looked at her and blinked, then let out a screeching call that tasted metallic. After a moment, the falcon left her arm and returned to the sky.

Seeing movement in the distance, Šahrāzād lifted her veil. She fished out the grain of sand which immediately lodged in one eye, and squinted through the shimmering blur of a heat-mirage. After a moment, a shape emerged: a man on horseback, descending a large sand dune. He vanished behind a second dune. Šahrāzād was beginning to think she'd imagined him when he reappeared a moment later. He was her CIA contact, and the reason for her presence here. She pulled her veil back into place and tapped the pocket holding the encrypted memory card. The card held evidence on the missing money from Amarco; hundreds of millions in U.S. dollars.

As the man drew nearer, she saw his face: eyes of stone set in iron cheeks. He rode a strong black stallion. *“As-salaamu aleikum,”* he said. *Peace be upon you.* He spoke perfect Saudi Arabic, but his voice tasted like poison.

“Wa aleikum salaam,” Šahrāzād replied. *Unto you be peace.*

The stranger pulled his horse alongside hers. “You have the item,” he said with a too-wide smile. The muscle below his left eyelid vibrated.

Šahrāzād’s skin turned cold. “What item?” she asked.

“The disk.”

“I’m hunting with my falcon.”

A muscle on the stranger’s face twitched, and his jaw tightened. “And I am the sword of the Mahdi,” he said.

Šahrāzād felt fear ripple through her, but contained it.

The man drew a curved knife and lurched at her. She tried to back up, but her horse spooked and threw her. She landed on her face, momentarily stunned. She felt her teeth dig into her lips, tasting blood mixed with sand.

Her attacker leaped from his horse and came at her, slashing with the blade. Šahrāzād rolled onto her back, the white heat of adrenaline pulsing through her like electricity. She drew her legs up to her chest, as if curling up in defeat—then snapped both feet into her assailant’s face, doing her best to break his neck. The man staggered back a step, spitting teeth, then surged forward.

Šahrāzād drew a small Glock pistol from her waistband and fired twice. The first bullet hit him in the left eye, the second in the forehead. She rolled aside as he fell, his life leaking into the sand. She gazed at the stranger. She hated killing, but he’d left her little choice. She felt guilt

in the act, but not in his death. She pushed those thoughts aside and continued with the task at hand. She took a moment to soothe the horses after the gunshots, then knelt to search the man's body. "*uTlubuu al-'ilm min al-mahd 'ilaa allaHd.*" she said to herself. Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. She found a cell phone, some matches, and a small camouflage-pattern Wenger Swiss Army knife.

She removed the phone's battery so she couldn't be tracked, and pocketed her finds. The man carried no ID, and no tattoos were evident. She snapped photos of his face with her camera. It was then that she noticed the blood on her hands, already drying in the desert heat. She poured water from a small bottle and rubbed her hands together. The blood turned rust-brown. She tried rubbing her hands harder, but the blood worked its way into the swirls of her fingerprints and the fresh crack in her watch crystal. The dead man's open eye was drying out in the merciless 120-degree heat.

Šahrāzād calmed herself, feeling a strange unity with the desert. She gazed up at the falcon as it circled above, a natural hunter. Someone knew. It could only be the Americans, or someone in The Kingdom. Either way, that meant they had to kill her. Despite the situation, she smiled. What was it the Americans said? *Strike one.*

In the distance, a tsunami of sand filled half the sky: a sandstorm, coming her way like an angry *djinn*. Such events could be beautiful—the way the airborne sand filtered the light—and Šahrāzād had always admired them. From a distance—which was where she intended to keep this one.

It was an eight-hour ride back to camp. In a world that tore time apart and shrank the space between all people, there was something refreshing about the solitude. Tethering the

second horse to her own, she mounted up and headed back. The falcon followed, screeching to the heavens.

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