

AUTHOR OF *THE SACRED BLOOD*

MICHAEL
BYRNES



†
THE
GENESIS
PLAGUE

THE GENESIS PLAGUE

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London · New York · Sydney · Toronto

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Also by Michael Byrnes

The Sacred Bones
The Sacred Blood

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For Caroline, Vivian, Camille, and Theodore

‘He that is in the field shall die with the sword; and he that is in the city, famine and pestilence shall devour him’

– The Book of Revelation

†THE
GENESIS
PLAGUE

PROLOGUE

MESOPOTAMIA, 4004 BC

Nightfall was darker now, more ominous, thought Enliatu. The unrelenting cloud cover choked the moonlight to a dull glow and blotted out every celestial light in the heavens. And with the darkness had come great misfortune for his people. It was not that Nahna, the illuminator god of the night sky, purposely hid from the earth. All of it, Enliatu was certain, could be attributed to a malevolent *earth* force: the outsider who had mysteriously emerged from the forbidden realm over the eastern mountains; the beautiful woman who was now being marched to her death.

The captive was flanked by eight warriors carrying spears and bitumen torches. Two of the men tightly gripped the ropes fastened to the leather collar cinched around her neck. Her hands were unbound so that she could carry the mysterious clay jar that had been in her possession since her arrival six moons ago. She cradled the vessel as if it were her child.

Her exotic fair skin and gem-like eyes were nothing like those of the dark-coloured tribes that inhabited the known lands. The women of the village were captivated by her. They'd competed to stroke her strange soft hair and smooth skin. To them, the unknown words that she spoke sounded like music, and her scent – sweet and spicy – seemed from another world. They'd prepared for her the finest foods, even braided her hair with beautiful flowers.

The men shared in the seduction, though their attraction was far more feral. Never had they laid eyes upon such an alluring female. As Enliatu had feared, they could not restrain themselves. They had vied for her attention, and her fierce indifference merely intensified the rivalry. Eventually the men agreed surreptitiously to share the prize.

On the third moon the conspirators – led by the two men whom Enliatu had designated to watch over her – crept into the hut where she slept. They covered her mouth, restrained her limbs, stripped away her coverings. Then, in predetermined order, they had their way with her until each man's carnal appetite had been sated.

The men later confided to Enliatu that she had not fought their advances. There had been no screams, no tears, no struggle. With flaccid repose she had stared at each aggressor with vacant eyes as he defiled her, a thin grimace twisting her soft lips.

By sunrise the first man had fallen ill. First came sweating, then chills and quaking limbs . . . and then the blood. So much blood.

All were dead before sunset.

If only the tragedy – the punishment – had stopped with them, lamented Enliatu.

As the procession moved swiftly along the bank of the swollen river, Enliatu noticed that the flood had swallowed the circular granaries up to their rooftops. Soon the mud bricks that formed their walls would soften and dissolve beneath the churning water, the straw roofs carried downstream to rot. Not a trace would remain.

Surely a cleansing was under way. Perhaps the creator, Enlil, was seeking to reclaim mankind itself for just as men had formed bricks to build dwellings, the gods had moulded men from earthen clay.

The procession broke away from the riverside and disappeared through a line of towering cedars. Beneath the dense forest canopy the torchlight illuminated only the nearest tree trunks against a perfectly black background. Soon the roiling river could no longer be heard. The warriors carried on in silence, while the prisoner began to softly hum a sensual melody. Overhead, the night owls, otherwise passive creatures, screeched in unison as if in response to her call. This caused the men to stop suddenly. They held the torches high and, with terror-filled eyes, searched the darkness with spears, the ready.

'Il-luk ach tulk!' Enliatu screamed out in frustration.

The handlers tugged the ropes, choking the prisoner back into submission. When she fell silent once more, the unearthly chorus above abruptly ceased.

The ground rose sharply; the cedars thinned and yielded to the scrubby foothills leading up to the stark, jagged mountains. The procession paused as Enliatu made his way forward to lead them up the scree-covered slope towards a fire pit flickering bright orange. The two boys he had sent ahead at daylight to prepare the site knelt beside the pit, stirring two clay bowls that simmered over the low flames.

The handlers goaded the prisoner ahead.

Keeping a safe distance, Enliatu instructed the boys to confiscate her burden. When they advanced towards her, she pulled the jar close to her breast, screaming wildly as they tried to tug it free. The handlers yanked back on the ropes until veins webbed out over her face and her eyes bulged. Finally the boys stripped the jar from her. She fell limp to the ground, retching.

'Ul cala,' Enliatu instructed the older boy. *Open it.*

The boy was not keen on carrying out the task, for he was certain that the jar itself might contain the woman's evil spells.

'Ul cala!'

The boy curled his trembling fingers under the lid, swiftly pulled it away. Immediately the dancing fire glow captured movement deep inside the vessel. He recoiled and stumbled backwards.

Undeterred, Enliatu stepped forward and extended his torch over the opened jar. Upon seeing the hideous form nestled within the jar, he scowled in revulsion.

The warriors exchanged uneasy glances and awaited the elder's instruction.

It would end here, tonight, Enliatu silently vowed. He instructed the boys on what to do next.

The older boy returned to the fire pit and slid wooden rods through the handles on the simmering clay bowls. Then his partner helped him to lift out the first bowl. Steadying it over the woman's jar, they decanted the glutinous, steaming liquid – kept pouring until the resin bubbled over the jar's rim.

The prisoner shrieked in protest.

Again the owls screeched from the dark forest.

Enliatu studied the concentric ripples billowing across the resin's shimmering surface. The wicked dweller was trying to emerge.

The petrified older boy replaced the lid, held it firmly in place until the thumping within the jar slowed, then ceased. He allowed a long moment to pass before pulling his hands away.

Satisfied, Enliatu turned his attention once more to the prisoner. On hands and knees, she was growling like a wolf, tears cutting hard lines down her dusty cheeks. Their eyes locked – two stars searing with determination. He was convinced that this was certainly a beast in disguise, a creature of the night.

Through bared teeth she hissed gutturally, spittle dribbling down her chin. All the while she kept her fingers wrapped around her beaded necklace – an object from her native land. Was this how she

communicated with the other realm? Enliatu wondered. Regardless, he was certain that she was cursing him, summoning her demon spirits to destroy him.

The time had come.

He signalled to the warriors. They forced her to the ground, face up, and restrained her splayed limbs. The largest warrior came forward, tightly gripping the haft of a formidable axe, its bronze blade glinting orange in the firelight. He crouched beside her, grabbed a fistful of hair at the crown and yanked her head back to expose the smooth flesh of the neck. A momentary assessment just before he raised the axe high, then brought it down in a precise arc aimed directly above the collar.

The blade split the soft skin and muscle to bring forth a rush of blood that seemed to glow in the firelight. A second fierce chop sank deeper into the gaping muscle to separate vertebrae – the victim's blood splashing up, painting the warrior's face and chest. He delivered two more blows, until the head was cleanly separated.

Grunting with satisfaction, the warrior tossed the axe aside and grabbed the severed head by its sooty locks. But his smile vanished when he looked into the glowering eyes that still seemed alive. Even the soft lips remained frozen in a taunting grimace.

Enliatu went to the fire pit. '*Eck tok micham-ae ful-tha.*' He pointed to the second simmering clay bowl.

Extending the ghastly head away from his body, the warrior dropped it into the boiling resin. Enliatu watched it sink lazily into the opaque sap amidst a swirl of blood – its dead eyes still glaring defiantly, as if to promise that the stranger's curse had only just begun.

1

NORTHEAST IRAQ PRESENT DAY

‘I’m empty!’ Jam called over to his unit commander who was four metres away, crouched behind a massive limestone boulder.

Keeping his right eye pressed to the rifle scope, Sergeant Jason Yaeger reached into his goatskin rucksack, pulled out a fresh magazine, and smoothly tossed it to Jam. Hot metal intermingled with the discharge gases blowing downwind from the muzzle vent on Jam’s rifle. ‘Slow it down or you’re going to lock it up!’ Precisely the reason Jam had earned his nickname, he thought.

Jam ejected the spent clip, snapped in the new one.

The unit’s mishmash of Russian weapons, scrounged from a wandering Afghani arms dealer, gave each man’s rifle a unique report that helped Jason to roughly keep a count on expended rounds. Jason was heavy on the trigger of his Cold-War-era AK-74 – more pull than squeeze. The others in the unit were far more judicious with their shots.

Though the ten remaining Arab militants had superior numbers and a high-ground advantage, the odds of the kill was heavily weighted in favour of Jason’s seasoned team. The dwindling ammo supply, however, couldn’t have come at a worse time. If the bad guys were to call for backup, Jason’s unit could be attacked from the rear in the open flatlands leading to the foothills. Worse yet, the enemy might slip through the nearby crevasse and head deeper into the Zagros Mountains – a rebel’s paradise filled with caves and labyrinthine, rugged passes.

Over the border and into Iran.

He whistled to Jam, made a sweeping hand motion that sent him scrambling up the hill and to the right. He fought the urge to scratch at the prickly heat beneath his scruffy beard, which, along with contact lenses that transformed his hazel eyes to muddy brown, a deep tan that could be the envy of George Hamilton, an unflattering galabiya robe, vest, and loose-fit pants combo, a keffiyeh headwear with agal rope circlet, and sandals – had respectably passed him off as a Bedouin nomad. The other unit members had donned similar dress.

It took less than a two-count before a red-and-white chequered keffiyeh popped up over the rock pile, a Kalashnikov semi-automatic sweeping into view an instant later. Sliding his index finger over the trigger guard while matching crosshairs to chequers, Jason squeezed off three successive shots that would’ve left a perfect dime grouping on a bullseye. Through the scope he saw a pink mist and red blobs spit out behind the headscarf.

He adjusted the remaining target tally downward: nine.

Ducking from sight, he grabbed his rucksack and scrambled away just as a pomegranate-shaped grenade arced over the boulder, landed in the sand and popped. A ten-metre uphill dash brought him to a rocky hillock covered in scrubby brush. More automatic gunfire burst in his direction as he dived for cover.

While the militants screamed back and forth to one another in Arabic – not Kurdish? – Jason brought out his Vectronix binoculars and scanned the two enemy positions. The device's laser automatically calculated GPS coordinates while recording live images on to its micro-sized hard drive.

Dipping beneath the hillock, he flipped open a laminated field map to verify the correct kill box on the grid. From his vest pocket he fished a sat-com that looked nearly identical to a civilian cell phone. He placed a call to the airbase at Camp Eagle's Nest, north of Kirkuk. A barely perceptible delay followed by a tiny digital chirp confirmed that the transmission was being securely encrypted, just before the command operator responded with the first authentication question: 'Word of the day?'

He pressed the transmitter button. 'Cadillac.'

Chirp. Delay.

'Colour?'

Chirp. Delay.

'Magenta.'

Chirp. Delay.

'Number?'

Chirp. Delay.

'One-fifty-two.'

Pause. Chirp.

'How can I help, Google?'

Even under fire, Jason had to smile. He'd earned his new nickname a few months ago, after joining the boys at the air-base for a drink-while-you-think version of Trivial Pursuit. Jason had circled the game board and filled his pie wheel without ever cracking open a beer. The other players weren't so fortunate, but maybe that was their intention. Obtuse facts – 'things no self-respecting 29-year-old should know' – were Jason's forte. What he wouldn't do to have that beer right now . . .

'We're low on ammo. Copy,' Jason reported loudly over the persistent rat-a-tat-tat in the background. 'Nine militants pinned down. Some light artillery. Need a gunship ASAP.' He provided the operator with the kill box and INS coordinates. 'Have the pilot call me on approach.'

'Roger. I'll have Candyman there in four minutes.'

Noting the time on his no-frills wristwatch, he slid the sat-com back into his vest and mopped the sweat from his eyes with his sleeve.

He needed to make sure that the others weren't too close to the intended strike zones.

First he glanced over to Jam, who was now a good fifteen metres further up the slope, curled up in a gulch, cursing at his weapon's stuck slide bolt. Vulnerable, but he was adequately covered.

Along the roadway at the hill's base, Camel was still dug in behind a felled, bullet-riddled Arabian one-humper. For the past few months, former marine sniper Tyler Hathcock had shared a strange – sometimes, disturbing – bond with the beast, which, coupled with his preferred cigarette brand, helped inspire his nickname. Earlier, Camel had used the beast as a decoy by riding it bareback down the narrow roadway to block the approaching enemy convoy. When the ambush began, he'd been trapped in the open. So he'd dismounted, shot his humped buddy through the ear and used it as a surprisingly effective shield.

Crazy bastard.

Not far from Camel's position, he spotted Dennis Coombs – dubbed 'Meat' for his imposing stature – that was pure Oklahoma farm boy muscle – still pinned down behind the severely strafed Toyota pickup that had been the convoy's lead vehicle. In the driver's seat was the slumped body of an Arab male, back of the head blown open, brain matter and gore smeared throughout the cabin, compliments of Jason's opening three rounds delivered from fifty metres to the mark's left eye.

Behind the Toyota were three more trucks left abandoned by the enemy. Eight dead Arabs littered the ground around them. Bobbing in and out of view over the hood of the second truck was the red turban marking Jason's last man, Hazo. The 42-year-old Kurd acted as the unit's eyes and ears, translator, facilitator, go-to man. Hazo was simultaneously their best asset and worst liability, since like most Kurdish Christians, he refused to handle a weapon. All brain, no brawn – but a helluva a nice guy. Jason guessed that Hazo was in the fetal position reciting a few novenas. If he didn't move, he'd be perfectly safe.

Jason low-crawled further up the rise. When he peeked up to survey the enemy again, he didn't like what he saw. Behind a formidable rock pile, three white-turbaned Arabs had unpacked a long polyethylene case they'd hauled out from the Toyota before taking off for the hills on foot. The same coloured weapon they were now assembling had a long fat tube with Soviet markings. A fourth man wearing a black keffiyeh was readying its first mortar shell.

'Damn.'

Jason used his binoculars to scout the airspace above the western plain, until he found the black biplane twelve clicks out over the horizon, closing in fast. Two minutes away, he guessed. He'd need to buy some time before the guys with the rocket launcher got busy.

He positioned himself behind a natural V in the rock. Not the best sight line and only the target's headscarves were visible . . . but he'd make it work. With the stock of his SVD sniper rifle nestled comfortably on his right shoulder, Jason stared through the scope and took aim at the black keffiyeh. Then he sprang up slightly until the target's angular, bearded face panned into view.

Pop-pop-pop.

The rounds hit home and pink mist confirmed the kill.

The mortar fumbled out from the dead man's hand, rolled out of view. The three white turbans retreated from his crosshairs as they scrambled to recover it. Jason sank back below the ridge. The sat-com vibrated in his vest pocket. He pulled it out and hit the receiver.

'It's Candyman. Talk to me, Google.'

'Three targets remaining in position one . . . guns and an RPG. Copy.'

'Roger. And position two?'

'Five gunmen. Copy.'

'You're getting soft on me. I thought we were gonna see some real action.'

'Sorry to disappoint, Candyman.'

After pocketing the sat-com, Jason took up his rifle and rucksack then kept moving further up the hillock, hoping to get a better angle on the white turbans. But only arms and legs occasionally came into view. With limited rounds to spare, it was headshots or nothing at all. He only hoped the men wouldn't succeed in loading the RPG-7 before the air strike commenced.

His new vantage point did, however, let him monitor the gunmen who were pinned down in the second position: four men surrounding one tall guy in the centre. Jason swung the rifle in the other direction and steadied the crosshairs over a chunky Arab who was all cheeks beneath a patchy grey beard. Patchy made an abrupt move that granted Jason a clear facial on the central figure nestled in the ring's centre. The sinister portrait Jason captured in the crosshairs made his heart skip a beat.

'Can't be,' he murmured.

That hard dark face, however, and the incredible death toll associated with it, was unmistakable. What the hell was *he* doing here? The visceral urge to pull the trigger was overwhelming. But if he knowingly took down terrorism's newest most-wanted man, he'd whip up an unimaginable shit storm. Directives were black and white for a reason, he reminded himself. Not yet. Let it go. He quickly zoomed in on the face with his binoculars and recorded the images.

Snatching up the sat-com, he used the analogue walkie-talkie channel to radio the other unit.

members: 'Nobody fire on position two. I repeat: hold your fire on position two.'

~~The thumping rotors of the AH-64 Apache were getting louder by the second. Dropping back, Jason~~ watched the gunship sweeping in on a direct line.

A second later, the sat-com vibrated on its digital channel and he hit the receiver.

'That you, Candyman?'

'Roger, Google. You ready for me?'

'Yes, but do not, I repeat, do not fire on position two. Over.'

'Got it. How 'bout position one?'

Jason peeked up over the rocks, saw one of the white turbans pop up then disappear. Then the rock tube came in and out of view. No clear shot for Jason.

'Hydras on position one. Have at it,' Jason replied urgently.

'Roger that. Stay low and cover your ears.'

Fifteen seconds later, the Apache was in strike range. The laser sensor on its nosecone locked on the rock pile's GPS coordinates. An instant later, a pair of Hydra 70 missiles launched from the chopper's stub-wing pylons.

Jason stole a final glimpse of position one. The RPG-7 launch tube jutted out from the rock, the time with a mortar securely affixed to its tip. It was going to be close.

Ducking down, he tossed his rifle to the ground, covered his ears, and pressed his back against the mound. He watched the missiles stream in along sharp trajectories that laced the crystalline blue sky with two crisp lines of exhaust smoke – a fearsome sight.

Then Jason witnessed an equally remarkable sight: as the tandem missiles hissed overhead, the rocket launcher's mortar sliced upward and glanced one of them – not hard enough to detonate the Hydra's warhead, but enough to push it off its intended path.

The first Hydra slammed position one and threw a reverberating blast wave over the mound that made Jason's teeth rattle. A rush of intense heat came right behind it.

A split second later, the second Hydra struck and the ground quaked even harder. The explosion echoed off the mountains.

Jason watched the chopper bank hard to avoid the wobbling mortar, which stayed airborne for five seconds before plummeting into an orchard of date trees and exploding in a tight orange fireball.

As he pulled his hands from his ringing ears, a tattered white turban covered in red splotches came fluttering down from the sky and landed at his feet. With it came the smell of burnt flesh.

Snatching up his rifle, Jason flipped the selector to burst. Then he scrambled down the slope careful not to let his sandals slip on the gore blanketing the hillside. With the rifle high on his shoulder, he swept the muzzle side to side, waiting for any movement near the decimated rock pile. The smoke and dust made it impossible to see what was happening behind the second position, so he eased back, took cover behind a boulder, and waited. He scanned the area through his gun scope. No activity.

A westerly wind quickly thinned the smoke.

Down below, Camel broke cover and sprinted up the slope. Jason covered him with suppressive fire until he did a home-plate slide through the gravel and came to a stop at Jason's feet.

'Safe!' Camel called out, grinning ear to ear like a school kid out for recess.

Some guys are born for this. Then Jason got a good look at Camel's face. It appeared as if he stuck his head in a bucket of gore. 'You all right?'

'I'm fine. My camel's fucked. Why the ceasefire on the second position?'

'Fahim Al-Zahrani is with them.'

'What?!' Camel's brow crinkled, cracking the congealing camel blood like dry clay. 'Can't be. I told you he's in Afghanistan.'

‘Intel’s wrong. Wouldn’t be the first time.’

‘You sure about this?’

‘Show you the pictures later,’ he said, tapping his binoculars. ‘He’s the tall one in the middle.’

Remember, the Pentagon wants him alive. So try not to shoot him and we’ll get home a lot faster.’

Suddenly, Jam screamed over to Jason: ‘They’re heading uphill!’

Jason and Camel went storming out on opposite sides of the boulder with weapons drawn.

The black smoke was still thick enough to provide cover for the Arabs, but Jason was relieved to see

Al-Zahrani’s awkward, tall form being pulled up the slope by a pair of cronies. The remaining two Arabs trailed behind them, hauling a second polyethylene case.

As Jason and Camel closed in behind them, Meat broke cover to pull up the rear.

Then Jam popped out from the gulch and began sprinting along the ridge in a perpendicular intercept. He had his now-useless AK-74 clutched menacingly in his right hand, knowing the best he could do was intimidate the Arabs, maybe slow their advance.

The dragnet was closing.

When Jason broke through the smoke, he saw that the Arabs had decided against the crevasse and were instead heading for a sizable opening in the cliff face that looked like a cave. Judging by the flames licking the rocky outcropping above the opening and the fresh scars above it where an entire section of the mountain had sheared away and tumbled down the slope, Jason figured that it had been the impact point for the deflected Hydra missile.

Once the Arabs had funnelled into the opening and disappeared from sight, Jason slowed his advance and signalled to the others to take cover. No telling what the Arabs were planning, and chasing after them into a cave wouldn’t be smart.

Could the blast hole be that deep? he wondered. And why would they corner themselves like that?

From behind a boulder, Jason scanned the opening with his binoculars. No sign of the jihad quintet, but when he zoomed in, he did notice something peculiar: about two metres into the opening the black void was framed by a rectangular enclosure – like an open doorway. Tighter magnification revealed bolt heads lining the hard, unnatural lines.

‘What do we have here?’ he muttered.

Someone whistled loudly.

Lowering the binoculars, Jason peered over to Meat, who was pointing to a smoking object that lay not far from where he’d taken cover. Even from a distance, Jason could tell that the mangled and blackened rectangular hulk of metal was the door that had been blown clear off the frame he’d just spied. Scoping the object, he determined it to be roughly one by two metres, fat as a phone book, with a wide circular turn-crank like he’d expect to find on a submarine hatch. The door’s unmarred section showed that it had been painted to match the mountain’s earth tones. Around its edges were remnants from military-grade camouflage netting. Must have been quite effective, he thought, if no one had spotted it earlier. The opening was certainly positioned high enough to trick the naked eye.

Maybe the militants hadn’t intended to slip through the mountains. Maybe they were heading to that place all along. Perhaps it was a bunker.

Then again, Jason had seen the Arabs do a double-take before running into the opening – like they were equally surprised to see it there. Either way, since this was no mere blast hole, there was a strong possibility that whatever had been protected behind that security door ran deep – *really* deep; the snaking cave systems running beneath these mountains could put Rome’s most impressive catacombs to shame.

He’d read in his field manual that the Zagros Mountains were formed from the ancient tectonic collision between the Arabian and Eurasian plates. The jagged range stretched 1,500 kilometres from northern Iraq down to the Straits of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, with peaks reaching 4,500 metres (even taller than Colorado’s Pikes Peak, he’d noted). Caves and tunnels resulted from the erosion of the softer mineral-laden rocks inside the mountains. The Zagros’s most bittersweet contribution to the region, however, was the sedimentary deposits trapped beneath its eastern foothills – Iran’s massive oil fields.

From out of the cave came a muffled fizzy sound, like a freshly cracked bottle of pop releasing its carbonation. Just as Jason’s eyes found the opening, a blinding glow flashed in the black void beyond the doorframe . . . the silhouette of a projectile . . . a resounding *whump*. In the next instant, a roiling fireball billowed out from the opening, throwing heat waves that rippled down the slope. Huge rock fragments shot out in all directions.

The Americans went for cover as the debris came raining down around them.

A softball-sized stone plummeted down and struck Jason squarely between the shoulder blades, knocking him flat to the ground. The wind heaved out from his lungs in a heavy gasp. Pain jolted up his spine, down his arms. He rolled on to his back, arcing his spine, groaning in pain, seeing nothing.

but white for a five-count. Had he not been wearing a Kevlar vest under his robe, the stone might have paralysed him.

Fast footsteps crunched along the gravel and came to a stop next to him.

‘You okay, Google?’

He blinked his eyes and drew a steady breath. ‘Yeah, I’ll live.’

Jam helped him to his feet and Jason squeezed his shoulder blades together to coax the pain away.

‘That’s gonna leave a mark,’ Jam said.

Jason noticed that Jam’s left cheek was red and blistered, the curly black scruff sizzled away.

‘You should talk,’ he replied with a wince.

‘I was a bit too close when the missile went off.’ He stroked the tangle of toasted hairs. ‘I needed a shave anyway.’

Jason looked up at the grey smoke cloud spewing out from the ridge. The doorframe was lost behind the collapsed cliff face. He shook his head in disbelief.

‘That was an RPG . . . right? I mean I barely saw it.’

‘Yeah, it was.’

He shook his head and put his hands on his hips.

Meat, Camel and Hazo jogged over to join them.

‘Everybody all right?’ Jason asked the trio.

‘Super,’ Meat grumbled. When he got a good look at Jam, he stepped closer and cringed. ‘What with your face?’ Then he got a whiff of the singed beard and said, ‘Aaah. I hate that smell . . . burnt hair. Shit, I’m gonna vomit.’ He shook his head violently.

‘You’re one to talk, Dracula. That blood mask really brings out your eyes.’

‘Ha, ha, very fun—’

‘All right fellas,’ Jason cut in. For frontline fighters, adrenaline surges always came with euphoria at least if you were still standing when the bullets stopped flying. It was the junkie high that kept them coming back for more. But it also made the hyped-up men tougher to rein in. ‘Good to see that everyone’s all right. I’m sure you’ve noticed that we’ve got a new problem on our hands.’ He motioned to the smoking cliff.

Camel pulled out a small round tin from his vest, opened it, and pinched out some chewing tobacco. In passing himself off as an abstaining Muslim, a nicotine patch would have been far subtler, but the chew sure beat puffing away on cigarettes. ‘Looks good to me. The rag-heads went and buried themselves.’ He began stuffing his cheeks full of tobacco.

Jam pulled a hunting knife off his belt and began cutting the singed beard away, since it did stir something fierce. ‘Seems to me they don’t want us coming in after them.’

‘I’d go with that,’ Meat agreed.

‘These caves . . .’ Hazo chimed in, his tone level and one notch too low. ‘The tunnels can lead anywhere. It’s no good. They could find a way out. Maybe on the other side of the mountain . . . maybe a kilometre away.’

‘Or they went and buried themselves,’ Camel reiterated before hawking a brown gob on to the rocks. ‘Crawled into a hole. Just like your buddy Saddam.’

The Kurd frowned.

Jason was inclined to agree with both assertions. ‘Let’s have a closer look at that door.’ He waved for them to follow, then strode over to it.

Kneeling beside the door, Jason could feel heat radiating off the blackened metal. He carefully hunted the surface for any telling marks: manufacturer’s stamps, engraved plates, painted emblems or Arabic scrawls, anything. He found nothing. ‘Let’s flip it,’ he told the others. ‘Cover your hands. The thing’s smokin’ hot.’

It took all five men to heave the thing up and over. It landed on the gravel with a crunching thump.

‘Weighs more than my wife,’ Camel grumbled.

‘Nah, she’s got a few more L-Bs on her,’ Meat said, as if to imply intimate knowledge. ‘More love.’

The others chuckled. Camel’s chewing came to grinding halt.

‘Cool it,’ Jason said as he squatted to resume the analysis. The door’s reverse side was clearly what would have faced inward. The twisted hinges looked like they’d been lifted from a bank vault. The turn-crank was bent into a pretzel shape. No telling marks. Not even on the edges.

‘That’s definitely military construction,’ Meat observed.

‘You’re a genius,’ Camel said under his breath.

Meat ignored him. ‘I’m guessing that’s one of the old regime’s hideouts. A fallout shelter, maybe.’

‘Shit, maybe we’ll finally find some WMDs squirreled away up there,’ Jam added.

Jason got to his feet. ‘Whatever’s inside that mountain must be mighty important to have been covered up like this.’

‘Hey wait. You missed something there, Sarge,’ Jam said, pointing to the corner where some camouflage netting had melted into the metal. ‘Here . . .’ He moved closer and tapped it with his knife. Then he stood and began cutting away the good half of his beard in large tufts.

Jason crouched and leaned in for a better look. Sure enough, there was a rectangular object caught up in the netting, slightly bigger than a credit card, thicker too. ‘Good eye.’

Whatever it was, it had taken a beating, just like the door. Curling his fingers under its edges, Jason tried to pry it free. But it had a plastic casing that had glued to the hot metal. He felt a tap on his shoulder.

‘Here,’ Jam said, handing over his Rambo-sized beard trimmer.

‘Thanks.’ Working the blade under the object, Jason managed to cut it away. Strings of melted plastic stretched behind it – like a shoe stepping off a wad of gum on a hot day. He let the strings cool before shaving them off.

‘You should put that stuff on your face, Jam,’ Camel said. ‘Be a good look for you.’

Handing the knife back to Jam, Jason turned the object over a couple of times. It was taup lightweight, with a now indiscernible picture on its topside – what might have been a passport photo. There was a long keyhole slit centred on its short edge where a clip or strap could be affixed. ‘Looks like a library card, or something.’

‘ID badge,’ Meat said.

Jason nodded. ‘Um.’

‘There’s probably a chip inside that casing,’ Meat added. ‘You know, like a swipe card.’

Jason proffered the card to Meat, who moonlighted as the group’s all-round techie. ‘Think you can open it up . . . see if there’s any useful data that might tell us who this belonged to?’

Meat took the card, flipped it over a couple of times. ‘Looks fried. I’ll see what I can do,’ he replied non-committally.

‘Make it happen,’ Jason said. ‘Now, we need to get into that cave. Fast. Unfortunately, as I see it, we’re going to need some help to make that happen.’

Everyone knew what he meant. None was thrilled about the proposition, yet no man could find an adequate reason to oppose it. Autonomy went only so far.

Reluctantly, Jason pulled out his sat-com and radioed the command operator with instructions to immediately dispatch a marine platoon to his position.

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

Wrapping up a business call, Pastor Randall Stokes discreetly passed his eyes over the attractive female reporter from the *Vegas Tribune* who was seated on the guest side of his mammoth mahogany desk. Ms Ashley Peters was too busy taking inventory of the inner workings of Our Savior in Christ Cathedral to take notice. Late twenties, he guessed. A bit conservative with highlighted reddish brown locks pulled back in a tight bun, designer eye glasses whose lenses seemed strictly cosmetic.

‘Look, a cathedral without a carillon is like an angel without wings . . .’ he told the caller ‘. . . or a four-cylinder engine in a Corvette.’ Pause. ‘I know, I know. We’ve been through all that . . .’

He noticed that Ms Peters was jotting copious notes with a mother-of-pearl pen as her shrewd gaze swept the bookshelves on one wall that brimmed with treatises on world peace and Evangelicalism, biographies of military generals including Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan, Napoleon, Patton. When she spotted *Guns, Germs, and Steel* among the collection, her meticulously groomed eyebrow tilted up. Then her attention shifted to the opposite wall where Stokes’s diplomas, certificate citations and war medals hung in neat frames together with a display of photos. When he saw her squinting, he snapped his fingers to get her attention, then motioned for her to get up and have a closer look.

Smiling, she stood up and went to take a look at the impressive photo montage. It took only a moment before the pen began moving rhythmically across the notepad.

‘You tell the architect that’s how it’s going to be. Remind him that *we’re* the client.’ There was plenty of biographical material on that wall to please any reporter, Stokes thought: Randall Stokes front and centre with international dignitaries; Randall Stokes rubbing elbows with Hollywood power brokers; Randall Stokes shaking hands with secretaries of state, presidents and generals spanning three presidential administrations. He noticed that Ms Peters paused longest on the shot of Stokes striking a pose alongside the Pope.

She continued along the wall to the portrait of a teenaged marine cadet in dress blues. Then came the photos of a twenty-something, more fit Randall Stokes with his war buddies, grinning and armed to the teeth amid the ravaged backdrop of half a dozen battle zones – Kuwait, Bosnia and Baghdad among them. She admired his glinting marine officer’s Mameluke sword mounted on a hook, then finished with the impassioned stills capturing Stokes in his most familiar role: preaching to the masses – his ever-swelling evangelical flock. In two other frames, those photos had morphed into *Time* magazine covers.

‘Don’t be afraid to use a little backbone, all right?’ Pause. ‘God bless you too.’ As he cradled the phone, he let out an exasperated sigh and folded his hands over his chest. ‘My apologies,’ he said to the reporter. ‘Been wearing too many hats lately.’ He rolled his eyes.

‘Not a problem,’ she said, and made her way back to the chair. ‘Still okay to use this?’ She pointed to the slim digital micro-recorder she’d set on the end of his desk.

‘Sure.’

She hit the device’s record button.

‘Where were we?’ Stokes asked.

‘The megachurch,’ she reminded him, pointing with her pen out the wide plate-glass window at the nearly complete gleaming glass, steel and stone construction superimposed over the distant backdrop of the Mojave Desert Valley’s sprawling casino metropolis. ‘How most confuse it for a sports arena,’ she reminded.

Stokes chuckled. ‘There will be no monster truck rallies or hockey games here, I assure you.’

‘Many call you a modern-day Joseph Smith – the proselytizing, the temple in the desert . . .’ she said, almost accusatorily with a tip of her left eyebrow.

Stokes made a dismissive gesture and grinned. ‘Ms Peters, I didn’t transcribe the Word of God from golden tablets scrawled in hieroglyphics.’ Not exactly the truth, he thought. ‘We’ll let the Mormons make those proclamations.’

The interview continued with innocent questions about the church’s tremendous growth and Stokes’s ambitious mission to transform faith not only in America, but in countries around the world to ‘baptize the world in the name of the saviour, Jesus Christ – the only path to redemption and salvation’. She then asked probing questions about his ‘retirement’ from the military, which were largely unanswered. Next, the reporter tactfully solicited his perspective on the motivational lecture series he’d parlayed into a global ministry, and why his fresh message of revelation proved so timely for Christians who saw the US invasion of Iraq as fulfilment of End Times’ prophecy heralding Christ’s return.

As Stokes anticipated, things soon turned serious when Ms Peters turned her queries to the contributions that funded both his global mission and this extraordinary construction project. Venturing into the minefield, the reporter had smartly turned up her charm. It began with some innocent nibbling on the tip of her pen – a mildly seductive act that Stokes had to admit was a potent distraction.

‘As you know, your past and current political affiliations have many speculating as to how the church raises its funds. There’s rumours that a major network is producing a scathing primetime exposé which suggests that large transfers have been deposited into your accounts. Transfers that can be traced –’

Stokes held up a hand. ‘Ms Peters, let *60 Minutes* speculate all it wants. Success always draws detractors. But I suggest *you* stick to the facts.’

‘Which are?’

Feisty, he thought. He sighed, tapped his thumbs together. ‘Our major contributors and benefactors choose to remain anonymous,’ Stokes simply replied, ‘just how Christ himself would have wanted it.’

‘I see,’ she relented. Some more notes. She paused the micro-recorder. ‘Off the record . . . do you miss all that?’ She pointed with the pen at the military photos. ‘The action, the glory?’

Spoken like a true civilian. ‘Memories of war aren’t like fond recollections of one’s first love.’

‘True. An ex-girlfriend might take your favourite sweatshirt and CDs . . . but not your leg.’

It was common knowledge that Stokes’s military career derailed in 2003 when a bomb in the road outside Mosul had claimed his right leg just below the knee. However, Stokes could tell by her reddening cheeks that she was well aware that the thin line of etiquette had just been crossed. Smiling tightly, he replied, ‘I suppose you’re right. Every soldier leaves a piece of himself on the battlefield. Some of us, more literally so.’

She nibbled the pen with more zeal and back-pedalled with, ‘It’s just so amazing how after all that . . . with all that you saw . . . you found God. I’ve read that it was after your . . .’ a pause to hunt for the right word ‘. . . accident . . . that He began speaking to you. Is that true?’

‘That’s right. And I have no doubt you’ve also read that my critics attribute my revelation to post-traumatic stress disorder.’ Stokes’s pundits didn’t merely cite the mental and physical trauma he suffered from his violent disfigurement. They even went as far as to blame the drug pyridostigmine bromide, or PB, which had been given to US troops during the 1st Gulf War to counteract the effects of chemical agents, such as nerve gas. By the way she smiled, he could tell he’d stolen some of her thunder. ‘Utter nonsense,’ he said loudly for the micro-recorder.

‘So you *were* chosen by God? You’re a prophet?’

‘Something like that, I suppose.’ His posture became more guarded.

The manner in which she now set down her pen implied that her next question would be off the record. ‘But you hear Him? When He talks to you, I mean.’

‘Loud and clear,’ Stokes soberly confirmed, casting his eyes heavenward.

She stared at him in wonderment for a long moment. ‘Wow.’

Now he could see her feline eyes subtly assessing him in impure ways. Charisma was like catnip for ambitious women like Ms Peters. Despite forty-six years and his mild ‘handicap’, he’d vigilantly maintained a physique that was nothing but lean muscle stretched over a wide six-foot frame. Strong jaw, a full head of hair that was still cropped into a high-and-tight, and a smooth bronze tan that made his green eyes flash. No doubt Ms Peters’s article would make note of his commanding presence. After all, there was no denying that the right image had buttressed his star power.

She snatched up the pen again, turned on the micro-recorder, her starry gaze turning clinical once more. ‘How about all this recent economic and political turbulence? Do you think it benefits the Christian Evangelical movement?’

Stokes shrugged. ‘Certainly humbles even the non-believers . . . forces introspection.’

‘Are the End Times here? Are scripture and prophecy being revealed?’

He swivelled his chair, peered out the window to the distant city centre where construction cranes hung motionless over the skeletons of unfinished casino resorts. Though not in a literal sense, sulphur and fire were raining on Sodom and Gomorrah. ‘Best to assume that judgement can come at any day, any hour.’

‘Do you think God’s judgement will fall on terrorists, like Fahim Al-Zahrani, for past atrocities and the recent attacks orchestrated against religious monuments around the world?’

The preacher’s expression turned severe.

Two months ago, Fahim Al-Zahrani – Al-Qaeda’s newest top lieutenant and the man rumoured to be Osama Bin Laden’s heir-apparent – had claimed responsibility for the most fearsome terror attack since 9/11. With the industrialized nations still in the throes of global economic crisis and waning political support for an increased military presence in the Middle East powder keg, his timing had been perfect. He’d masterminded wide-scale attacks on soft targets with the express intent of unravelling the fabric of Western society. Al-Zahrani was like a patient *torero* weakening the bull for a final thrust of the sword.

Stokes’s voice went down an octave as he replied, ‘Any man who sends suicide bombers into holy places like St Peter’s Basilica and Westminster Cathedral should expect eternal punishment beyond human comprehension. To murder innocents on such a grand scale is unconscionable, even by the standards of fundamentalist Islam. Regardless of what happens here, on this earth . . . whether perceived as justice or injustice . . . no manhunt, no supreme court, will ever compare to the wrath of God.’

The reporter had to catch her breath before continuing. She held up her pen, cleared her throat, and said, ‘On that note . . .’ She skimmed her list of questions. ‘With the tide reversing on the recent troop withdrawals in the Middle East, some say we may soon embark on a modern Holy War. A new crusade between West and East. In your opinion, will military intervention ever change the dynamic in the

Middle East?’

His reply was anything but direct. ‘Not until every human being has accepted Christ as humankind’s saviour will the war for souls end.’

Stalemate.

The desk phone buzzed quietly – a ring-tone assigned to a secure, dedicated line. ‘Excuse me.’ Hiding his alarm, Stokes stiffly picked up the phone. He listened as the caller calmly reported without preamble: ‘They’ve found the cave.’

Chirp. Delay.

‘I see,’ he replied. ‘Hold a moment.’ Stokes glanced up to the reporter. He covered the receiver and said to her, ‘I’m afraid we’ll need to stop here.’

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