

QUEEN

A novel

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Dr. Richard Lyon's hands trembled as they hovered above the keyboard, hesitant to write the words of the final email. He closed his eyes, flexing his reluctant fingers, and exhaled. He knew what had to be done, even if lives were lost as a result. The last piece of the puzzle was in place. And now he had to write one more email—one that would change everything.

Lyon opened his eyes and forced himself to type as the last glow of the day peeked through the dusty blinds. Staying on at the University long past retirement age to continue his research had finally proven beneficial—although not entirely in the manner he expected. His mouth pulled into a grim line as he typed the closing paragraph then reread his words . . .

Charles Doughty
Senior Editor
Saudi Aramco Magazine

Dear Sir,

May 15, 2007

I am well aware that your periodical does not represent political themes. After reading this article, you may change your mind.

. . . As Dr. Lyon continued to read, he leaned back in his worn leather chair, the stubborn wheels beneath groaning at the shifted weight. The computer screen brightened the dimly lit office, casting its artificial glow upon the books—some stacked from floor

to ceiling—books that contained the written works of ancient explorers and renowned world scholars.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway outside, and the professor turned in anticipation, expecting a student with questions about the mid-term humanities paper. Instead, an envelope slid under the door. Lyon rose and picked it up. It was plain, white, and addressed to him. Curious, he opened his door, looking left, right, searching for the deliverer. The short hallway was empty.

Leaving the door ajar, the professor settled into his seat and slid his index finger beneath the sealed flap. But there wasn't a note. In fact, within lay another white envelope, identical to the first. Lyon removed it, squinting to read in the near darkness. Printed across the plain front were the words:

VENITE, DILECTI FILII, EGREDEMINI IN HORTUM.

He stared in horror at the Latin script—a quote penned by Thomas Aquinas on his deathbed. Blood rushed to the professor's ears as his face heated with disbelief.

They already know.

How had they found out? He inhaled sharply, realizing that this single envelope had brought his life's research to a grinding halt.

Slowly he opened the second envelope, catching a waft of almond scent. Tiny particles of white exploded into the air, invading his nostrils and rushing to his lungs where irreversible damage occurred. The impact of the salt-like chemical was almost immediate, and Dr. Lyon felt his thoughts muddle together and blend into a fierce throb. He braced himself against his chair, trying to understand what was happening to him.

His gaze slid to the envelope he'd dropped on the floor, the contents spilled. The almond scent still hovered in his senses.

Cyanide.

Horrified panic constricted the professor's chest as he realized that just like St. Thomas Aquinas's Latin invitation, he would take the dead saint's revelation about the Queen of Sheba to the grave. Within sixty seconds his breathing became labored and he gasped for air, air that was all around, but seemed to pulse away from him. The room faded to black, then lightened again—if only for an instant. It was then that one last thought of clarity made its way into the professor's mind.

Press send.

He knew lives depended on his final living act. Dr. Lyon leaned forward, feeling the ground sway beneath his feet as his body started convulsing. Just as he spiraled into a collapse, his finger reached the mouse and clicked on the small rectangle box:

S E N D

Then all went black.

North of Jerusalem

Five days earlier

I am a liar . . . at least in their eyes, Omar Zagouri thought.

No other explanation could be given about a three-year old Palestinian child flinging rocks at a car with an Israeli license plate—except that hatred was taught from infancy. Hatred blinds men, justifies murder, but most of all, hatred lies.

I represent everything that oppresses them, everything they despise. All the more reason to finish this job and get the hell out of here.

Omar swung his pick ax with renewed determination, putting his weight into the motion. He was wiry, but stronger than most men twice his size. The stone wall crumbled like clay beneath his efforts. Sputtering as dust filled the stale, underground air, he wiped the perspiration from his face with a grimy sleeve.

“We’re close!” said the man next to Omar. “Feel the cool air?” The man’s grin showed tobacco-stained teeth.

Omar placed his hand against the jagged rock then pulled back in surprise. Cold seeped through the cracks with a gentle caress, causing the hairs on his arm to rise. He and several other Palestinian laborers had been in this tunnel since daybreak. Working for hours in such cramped space, the moving air brought reprieve. They had been forced to skip supper as their boss, Khalil, kept urging them on. And now, Omar felt excitement sear through his body. They *were* close.

Only another foot or two and the tunnel beneath the Israeli border would be

complete. Government walls would no longer stop Palestinians from crossing the northern border at their convenience. Just a few days earlier, the wife of the landlord died from internal bleeding because she had delivered a baby after curfew and couldn't be taken to the hospital.

Omar gritted his teeth at the memory and swung the pick again and again with energized force. The dim light of the propped flashlights seemed to lessen, elucidating the task before them. Although born Israeli, Omar disagreed with some of the decisions made by the government to suppress his fellow Arabs. It had been an exhausting two weeks living in the small village, trying to talk and act like a native Palestinian. Omar felt an itch crawl along his upper lip, and he rubbed at his newly-grown mustache. *That's one thing I won't miss about this undercover job.*

In any case, this assignment was just filler because no ancient artifacts had been stolen or smuggled out of the Middle East for a few weeks. Omar's official title was Special Agent for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage and Ancient Artifacts. Luckily he didn't have business cards because they probably didn't come in jumbo sizes. And since he'd used all his vacation in the first two weeks of the year—due to a mishap at a New Year's Eve bash, here he was. Digging.

But before committing to this assignment, Omar had been promised that the Israeli government only wanted to monitor the tunnel for Jihad leaders and weapon smugglers. It would not be destroyed nor would Palestinians be prevented from using it. Israeli officials saw the completion of the tunnel as a perfect opportunity to monitor illegal activities. His job was to gain the trust of the Palestinian villagers, volunteer for the work force, serve as a night guard, then install security cameras along the tunnel ceiling.

A splay of broken rock tumbled onto Omar's feet. His boots weren't as sturdy as they should be, and he cried out in pain then pressed his mouth closed, feeling sheepish. A couple of the Palestinians looked over at him with concern, so Omar nodded that he was okay. *These people have big hearts.* It had been a pleasure living among them, and several times he'd felt their pain as if it were his own. Decade after decade, bad seeds had been sown, and now they uncontrollably sprouted hate throughout the community. And a foolish move from the government, such as a bombing raid that killed innocent civilians, only multiplied and justified it. *Learned hatred that could easily be directed toward me if they knew my real identity.*

Omar's pick pummeled against the rock, which collapsed into . . . black. Excited shouting erupted around him, followed by fierce shushing. He stared at the gap in the stone before him. The draft of cool air poured through as if it had finally found freedom, accompanied by a smell, dank and sour—almost putrid.

“Yalluh, yalluh.” *Hurry, hurry,* several workers said. The men swung their axes again, choking dust billowing around them.

Increasing his intensity, Omar struck against the rock with fervor. He didn't even mind the bits of earth pelting his face or the dust stinging his eyes. It was as if a dam had been broken—the rocky soil caved beneath his pick like goat cheese. Putting more strength into each stroke, his shoulders felt as if they would burst the seams of his cotton t-shirt. Only the consistent *thwack* of the pick axes could be heard throughout the tunnel.

Caught up in the elation of his co-workers, Omar was the last one to relax his hold on the handle of his pick ax. As the dirt and debris settled at his feet, he noticed the slumped shoulders of his friends and their open-mouth amazement. Following their gaze, he stared into the muddled blackness—dissipated by what he thought must be the soft

glow of moonlight.

It took him a moment to realize there was no moonlight coming from the other side of the tunnel wall, but the only illumination came from the flashlights the workers shined into the dark. The glow bounced off a stone wall.

Slowly the interior walls came into focus. Omar gazed at the painted inscriptions on the stone, shown by the moving beams—symbols, diagrams, and drawn figures. Then his breath caught. In the center of the circular room sat a sarcophagus balanced on a pedestal.

“It’s a tomb,” he whispered.

