

4118 - 15th Avenue
Vernon, B.C.
V1T 8H1

136,600 words
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Rodney C. Power

Tel: 250-542-7640
Email: rod@rodpower.com



THE EXORDIUM

A NOVEL

by

Rodney Christian Power

Author's Note

The Republic of Yemen was created in 1989 from the merger of the Yemen Arab Republic in the north and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south. Because a majority of the population did not agree to this abrupt joining of hands, old tribal feuds soon flared up, making for a troubled marriage. By 2002, when Taliban and al-Qaeda forces were being routed from Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden was quick to realize his ancestral home was ripe for takeover. His supporters poured in by the hundreds, taking up residence all over the land, and terrorist attacks soon became commonplace. But two years later, as he was preparing to make his move, a profound incident took place in the northeast sector of Yemen that threatened the stability of the entire peninsula. Even the master terrorist himself was alarmed.

Certain characters in this story are real, while others are based upon well-known world figures. All other characters, to the best of my knowledge, never existed.

***IN THE NAME OF ALLAH
THE COMPASSIONATE
THE MERCIFUL***

*Praise be to Allah, Lord of Creation,
The Compassionate, the Merciful,
King of Judgement-day!
You alone we worship, and to You alone
we pray for help.
Guide us to the straight path
The path of those whom You have favoured,
Not of those who have incurred Your wrath,
Nor of those who have gone astray.*

The Exordium



PROLOGUE

Professor Colwell removed his reading glasses and rubbed his eyes. He took three deep breaths to control his mounting excitement, turned up the gasoline lantern, then rearranged his notes. Holding the pages in both hands, he continued to study them. Before long the annoying crackle of his solar heater faded away. The high-pitched babble of Yemeni laborers sitting around the outside fire vanished into oblivion. Even the numbing arthritic pain in his left shoulder had lost its bite.

For this single moment in time there was only Arnold Colwell and the Marib scrolls.

Shaking his head in disbelief, he set aside his notes and flexed the fingers of his right hand several times before beginning anew the painstaking task of transcribing the final ten pages of minute Hebrew script into English. The dialect was Yemenite, rare enough, so there was every possibility that somewhere in the translation he might have erred. Perhaps just by two or three key passages but enough to alter the central meaning.

At four ten in the morning Colwell stood up and began to massage his right hand. He noticed both were trembling. After staring down at the pages for several minutes, he unzipped the tent flap and stepped outside. Two hundred paces to his right the moon played shadows off the remnants of a massive stonewall that had once marked the easterly limit of the old palace.

Colwell watched a family of mouse-tailed bats dip and dive after several black and white moths that lived in the stonework. The frantic beating of their wings made not a whisper of sound. At this hour, within the moonlit stretch of sand and rocks wistfully called a courtyard by his student assistants, the silence was complete.

Located near the southern extremity of the *Rub al Khali* that swung down out of Saudi Arabia, the Marib site was well above the three thousand foot level and often chilly during the long January nights. Colwell did not notice the cold because he was deep in thought. His first urge was to wake his colleague, Riley Gaven, and share his findings with the younger man. But some inner voice stopped him, because the dimmest outline of the colossal impact of his discovery was just beginning to take shape. Pondering his course of action, the archaeologist glanced at the Stars and Stripes rolled up in one corner of his tent. True, this was a U.S. sponsored expedition, but Colwell knew better than to flaunt his nationality in the heart of Arabia. So the flag that should have been proudly standing guard outside remained hidden away.

He hesitated a few more minutes before starting out across the still warm ground in his bare feet. A mongrel kept by one of the laborers growled as he patted the side of Hamud's tent and quietly called his name.

Waiting for the Iranian student to dress, Colwell raised his head to the overhead canopy in an effort to calm his growing anxiety. Other than the ancient city of Marib itself, located forty miles to the southwest, no artificial light of any kind interfered with the radiant glory of the heavens. But Colwell realized now that these same stars had observed the unfolding of far greater events than the forgotten kingdom of Bilqis, the fabled Queen of Sheba, whose summer palace was slowly being uncovered by the two Americans and their international team of sixteen young men and women with the help of thirty Yemeni laborers.

It had taken four years to get permission to excavate the ancient ruins, and even now, six months into the project, there was continuing pressure to shut it down. Al-Qaeda was everywhere these days, Ambassador Lewis had explained to Colwell, and their targets were not always military. The team had been instructed to exercise extreme caution, as if extreme caution was something that could be ordered up like a pizza.

The young Iranian stumbled from his tent rubbing sleep from his eyes. “What is it?” he whispered.

Colwell placed a hand on his shoulder. “Come with me.”

While the two men retraced the eighty paces across the courtyard, Colwell remembered that Hamud Khorasa had come to him highly recommended by an associate at Cambridge, a grumpy academic who seldom recommended anyone. Colwell had jumped at the chance to have the Iranian with him during the crucial first twelve months of the five-year dig, when most of the important decisions were made.

But Colwell had not awakened this particular student to seek his advice on matters of an archaeological nature. Inside the big Nizan tent that served as office and Colwell's sleeping quarters, he told the Iranian, “I’ve just completed my translation of these scrolls. I want to read you the final ten pages.”

Hamud nodded, still half-asleep. He recalled their earlier excitement, fully anticipating that the Marib scrolls could be from the time of Bilqis. But according to Professor Colwell they had turned out to be of relatively modern vintage. There were forty small squares of parchment in all, inscribed by one Asmir al-Araham, a Jewish physician, or blood-letter, who lived in the middle of the seventh century.

Al-Araham had set down a finely detailed account of his early days in Bawgad, a large village in Iraq later to become its capital, Baghdad. The scrolls comprised a meticulous record of life during that time. Hamud knew this, as Professor Colwell often reviewed his progress with the translation during the evening meal.

But Hamud was not at all prepared for what was to follow.

In the year 661, twenty-nine years after the death of the Prophet Mohammed, al-Araham suddenly found himself a key player in a monumental deception. He was subsequently forced to flee for his life to one of several Jewish settlements in the hills of Arabia Felix, in later years to become known as the Republic of Yemen.

Colwell began to feel apprehensive. From the personnel files he knew Hamud had once been an Islamic scholar who had studied under several teachers of repute. The Iranian was sure to know the first Jewish settlements in Yemen had been established to escape Mohammed's purges

of those Jews living in and around Medina at the time. Some years after al-Araham's arrival in the small community of Yamib that had been built upon the ruins of the old Queen's summer palace, perhaps after assuring himself that he was safe, the Jewish blood-letter apparently decided to record his account of the conspiracy. Why he did this seemed unclear to Colwell, unless the man wanted the whole world to know the truth, not—judging from the manner in which the copper cylinder had been embedded in one of the walls—during his lifetime, nor during the lifetime of his grandchildren.

As the incredible tale unfolded, Colwell kept glancing at Hamud to monitor the effect of his words. Many revered names suddenly appeared: the Prophet Mohammed; his adopted son, Mohammed Ali; the Prophet's widow, Aisha; Abu Bekr, the first caliph; Muawiya, governor of Syria; General Amr, conqueror of Egypt; Othman, the Prophet's son-in-law; and so on. By story's end the Iranian's face had turned so pale Colwell wondered if the young man was going to topple over. Outside, the rose-colored first light of dawn signaled the time for morning prayer. Hamud took note of this and declared in a quivering voice that he had to leave.

The elderly archaeologist nodded. "But not a word to anyone, you understand?"

In watching Hamud Khorasa wander back across the courtyard to collect his prayer rug, the American was struck by a sudden, disquieting thought. *Was Hamud himself a Shi'a?* Colwell had been so anxious to sound out his theory he had completely forgotten that Hamud, being an Iranian, was in all probability a partisan, a Shi'a, of the same Islamic sect as the majority of Yemenis who lived in the northern sector of the country. Even though the ramifications of the final ten pages of the scrolls were still diffused and unfocused in his mind, Arnold Colwell wondered now if he had not made a serious error in judgment.

From the top of the rocky plateau overlooking the courtyard, the first three laborers to arrive for prayer saw a figure move out from behind the professor's tent. Seeing it was just one of the students, they thought nothing of it.

Before beginning the short climb to join his fellow Muslims, Hamud turned to look back at the old professor, standing erect at the entrance to his tent. Dr Colwell was possibly the finest Middle Eastern archaeologist alive today, so Hamud was confident the year spent working under him would all but cinch his own doctorate when the time came.

But did that matter now?

He was late and laid out his father's small prayer rug behind the Yemenis as quietly as he could. Superior knowledge of Koranic teachings had garnered him some small respect from among these coarse people, so it was usually he or the Saudi student, Amann, who stood in front and began the prayer. Now Hamud was at the rear, like a woman. But on this occasion his pride was of no concern. Colwell's startling revelation was still rattling around inside his head, stretching his imagination to its very limit.

Because in his bones he knew it was so. *It had happened!* The Jew's final sentence had been: *I, Asmir al-Araham, swear before God and Abraham that my words bear witness to the truth.*

During the brief supplication his mind continued to race back and forth between the shadowy events of the past, then plunge headlong into a dark and forbidding future. Back and forth, back and forth. Despite the chill of early dawn he could feel his perspiration building. Disconnected from the sacred ritual of morning prayer, he brooded over the terrible injustice taking place in his country, the American invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan. A warm dampness against his cheeks brought him back to the present moment. He was crying. But were they tears of joy, or tears of sorrow? The Iranian did not know.

What he *did* know was that when the contents of the Marib scrolls were revealed, anarchy would reign across the globe.



PART ONE

Truth has come. Falsehood has vanished and shall return no more

The Koran, 34.49



CHAPTER ONE

Like the desert winds, they came out of the north. At least thirty men, leading a packtrain of camels. For some obscure reason they had chosen to travel along the desert floor until it ran out. Squinting in disbelief, the lookout reached for his binoculars. The field of view given to him was north to east, toward the stretch of no-man's-land claimed by both Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Recent reports of terrorists operating in the area had made it necessary to keep a constant vigil.

From their dress he could tell they were Bedouin. Traders, on their way to Sana'a? *With a camel train?* Why, he wondered, when the Saudis had more lorries than a man could count. It was his duty to alert Captain Hafez, who during the early afternoon, he knew, would either be asleep or chewing *qat* in his tent.

The senior officer's response over the radio was curt, but his tone quickly shifted when he realized a band of Arabs was about to pay him a visit.

“These frontier Bedouin are unpredictable bastards. I don't trust them. For all we know they could be al-Qaeda. Keep your eyes open, Jabal, and remain alert. At the first sign of trouble, open fire!”

Captain Hafez felt justified issuing this order. Yes, four of the top al-Qaeda leaders in Yemen had been taken down in the last few months, but many fanatics were still out there,

awaiting their chance to achieve glory. With the hard targets in Sana'a and Aden under close scrutiny, it was only a matter time before they began looking for soft targets. For sure, two American archaeologists and a bunch of students were about as soft as they come. Al-Qaeda or not, Hafez did not care for large bodies of men dropping in unannounced. Shaking his head in disgust, the officer used two fingers to dislodge his plug of *qat* and went off to alert the professor.

Arnold Colwell had just climbed up from the bowels of the palace ruins, having carried out a special task while the others rested in the midday heat. Out of breath, he leaned against a chunk of the palace wall and flicked the sweat from his brow. The Arkansas native was a wizened birdlike man with no fat to speak of, just parched skin stretched over arthritic bones that didn't care for the climb one little bit. Gulping in the hot dry air, he doffed his aged Panama and began to fan his face. A window to one of the work trailers had been left open, allowing the wind to blow sand into the unit. He sighed. No matter how many times he stressed the basics, things were still forgotten. Ah well, they're only kids. At least his primary burden would soon be removed from his shoulders. Five days ago he had placed a call to the U.S. Ambassador in Sana'a to ask Lewis to come see him as soon as possible. Colwell did not explain over the cell phone, because his transmission could be easily monitored but emphasized the urgency. Lewis was tied up in other matters but promised to drive up as soon as he could.

There was every possibility that the material he had just hidden from prying eyes might turn out to be the most important find of his life, and he was certain it was the most dangerous! He was anxious to get rid of it. Once again realizing this was his last dig, Colwell thought back to that first magical summer up in Drumheller, Alberta, in the closing days of World War Two. He was only fifteen years old, but even back then he knew archaeology was his future. For many years it had been an all-consuming passion.

He relished the travel and the long periods away from the day-to-day routine. But in these last few years other interests had come into his life: seven wonderful grandchildren, and he missed them terribly. The truth of the matter was that he *wanted* to go home! For the first time in his long professional career, Arnold Colwell missed his family. He would be eighty years old when the Marib excavation was due to be completed, but he didn't plan on staying that long. Two years perhaps, then Gaven could take over.

Surveying the still courtyard, Colwell was surprised to see Captain Hafez exit the office tent and pause to look around. When Hafez caught sight of the professor, he moved toward him with purpose.

“A camel caravan comes,” Hafez said in Arabic while still ten paces away. “From the north. Jabal says Bedouin. I do not know. Maybe.”

The archaeologist turned his head toward the *Rub al Khali*, wondering why a modern day camel train would be traveling the old spice trail. “How very odd,” he said, recalling that the Marib site had once been a primary resting station on a major caravan route. But that was well over two thousand years ago. “I suppose they’ll expect tea and something to eat. Rouse the cook, would you, Hafez.”

Colwell watched the officer make his way over to the kitchen tent muttering to himself. Two infantry sections had been assigned to provide protection at the Marib site, not regular soldiers but members of some sort of reserve unit the government rented out to foreigners. This scruffy group of twenty-two men wore a *kind* of uniform, with big ammo belts around their middles loaded up with an amazing assortment of odds and ends, from huge knives to cameras to dangling bundles of *qat*. A military bodyguard was just one of many criteria the Americans had to meet in order to obtain permission to excavate the historic site. By agreement between the Yemeni Ministry of Antiquities and sponsors of the expedition, the National Geographic Society and the Smithsonian Institute, food and wages for the soldiers had become part of Colwell's overhead. He would have felt safer with a handful of Marines.

Word of the approaching caravan spread like wildfire as clumps of dark little Yemenis in their dusty *footahs* and derelict suit jackets gathered in the middle of the compound. While camels were common enough, a real caravan was a rare sight in this part of the world. All the shouting woke the others, who soon joined the laborers for what was beginning to take on the overtones of a festive occasion.

The Arabs arrived in a cloud of swirling dust, as if they had brought more wind with them. Solemn, hawk-faced men, with centuries of sun and sand written upon their weathered features. The animals bellowed in protest as their masters flicked their ungainly heads to force them to kneel. There were about forty camels in all, the last ten loaded with rounded packs, one

on each side of the hump. Several mongrels began barking and running in and out the camels' legs. The laborers crowded around in excited chatter, jostling with each other to gain control of the braided halters, as if it were a privilege to tether these ungainly ships of the desert.

The soldiers hung back with the sixteen members of the archaeological team, grinning at the unexpected commotion. Several held their rifles at the ready position. Most wore Czech automatic pistols with traditional thick-bladed *jambiyyas* tucked into their ammo belts. Captain Hafez had warned his men to be ready for trouble, but it appeared to him now that their visitors were ordinary tribesmen, likely from somewhere out in the vast Empty Quarter.

One man broke off from the Bedouin, beating the dust out of his *djellaba* as he approached the group. He was a man of indeterminate age but handsome enough in a fierce sort of way. After a brief perusal of the assembly, smiling all the while, he said, "Dr Colwell?"

Colwell was surprised, as was Hafez. When the American stepped forward, the Bedouin tribesmen, in a choreographed move, all came round their camels at once. At the same instant of time a burst of automatic rifle fire in the near distance made Hafez reach for his pistol. The man who had inquired after Colwell shot the officer twice through the heart. Heavy woolen robes were pulled back to reveal a row of stubby-barreled HK MP-5s. The soldiers were ordered to drop their weapons. When one of the women let out a bitter scream, the Arab leader stepped in front of her and laid his pistol against her forehead. He seemed to consider her life for the briefest period of time before pulling the trigger. Three of the other four women collapsed in shock. The Yemeni laborers scattered toward the western hills. One half of the Bedouin team, every second man, moved round their camels again and opened fire. In less than a minute all thirty fleeing Yemenis were down. Four of the Arabs went over to make certain and an occasional burst of gunfire finished off some poor bugger still twitching about.

Colwell opened his mouth to speak but found that words would not come. As the soldiers were being herded over toward their fallen countrymen, one Yemeni unholstered his pistol and fired two quick shots. An Arab fell to the ground as his silent companions once again allowed their weapons to speak for them. The air grew heavy with the acrid smell of cordite.

Within ten minutes of their arrival, the solemn men from out of the north had terminated the lives of fifty-three men and one woman. Colwell and the other survivors shrank back in terror. Their sheltered lives could not possibly have prepared them for what was still to come.

When several Bedouin set about stripping the corpses, the Arab leader took Colwell by the arm and walked him away from the others. “These Yemenis are nothing more than a bunch of baboons,” he said in a crisp British accent. “Sitting around all day chewing on leaves—do not give them even a second thought. And the woman,” he added with a shrug, “had no saving graces. If she had been even moderately attractive I would have spared her life. This is the fault of her parents, is it not? Besides, the last thing this world needs is another corpulent female. Do you not agree, Dr Colwell?”

In saying this, the man removed Colwell’s cellular phone from his belt and tossed it to one of the other Arabs. When the archaeologist finally found his voice, his words came out in a croak. “What kind of men are you? My God, why? *Why?*”

“Ah, the reason for our little surprise visit. The scrolls, of course, all forty pages, plus both translations. Then we will leave you in peace and fade off into the desert. Since you are aware of the contents, you must know how dangerous it would be to have such a story made public, no matter how little credibility it has. You, above all people, should have some idea of the confusion this would create.”

The elderly American, shocked as he was, managed to tear his eyes away from the nearby corpse. It was apparent this man was no simple desert tribesman, and more likely than not connected to al-Qaeda. God knows, Colwell thought, he had been warned enough times about the danger of continuing his work. And pressure to abandon the dig had grown even more intense since the recent capture of the notorious Mohammed Hamdi al-Ahdal just a few miles south of the site. But how was it possible, he wondered frantically, for news of the scrolls to have leaked out? In the end he had decided against sharing his findings with the others, choosing instead to turn the documents over to Ambassador Lewis. Hamud knew, yes, but the Iranian student had neither left camp nor asked to use Colwell’s cellular phone, their only connection with the outside world. In any case Colwell could not imagine Hamud sharing such a contentious

revelation with any of his fellow students. Even if he had, no one had left the camp since their initial discussion.

Then the whole picture suddenly came into focus, as he realized that the actions of this swine had confirmed his worst fears. He glanced back at the naked bodies and whispered, “Shi'a ...”

The smile broadened to display a gleaming set of pure white teeth. “You will find few partisans in my Arabia.”

My Arabia! Just how high up the ladder did this man go? Colwell also understood with a terrible certainty what would happen the moment he turned over the scrolls. The butchers would complete the job. No one would be left alive to tell of their atrocity.

Arnold Colwell was no hero, had neither fired a gun nor even struck a man during his entire seventy-five years of tenure on this planet. Now his voice hardened. “You idiot! The scrolls were taken to Sana’a yesterday. All this slaughter—*for nothing!* In the name of God, why didn't you ask, before you started all ... this?”

This time no smile accompanied the Arab's reply. “I am Sahallah, a name I promise you will not forget.” Then he raised his pistol and fired into Colwell's left shoulder. The American cried out and crumbled to his knees.

Sahallah barked an order. Two of his men came running to fetch the archaeologist and drag him back with his students. Others were amusing themselves by killing off the few dogs still hanging around. Another Bedu grabbed the Iranian student by the hair and shouted to his companions that he had captured one of Khomeini's clones. Even in the midst of his personal agony, Colwell realized the terrible truth, that one of his people was a spy! How else would they know Hamud was Iranian unless such knowledge had been provided beforehand?

With shock setting in swiftly, the American struggled to remain conscious. His assistant, Riley Gaven, bent down and ripped off Colwell's bloodied shirt to inspect the wound. One of the four remaining women inched over to help. Another let go a piercing shriek.

Looking up, Colwell couldn't believe what he was seeing. Having stripped the meager clothing from all the Yemenis, the murderers were now propping up their bodies as if in prayer, heads and knees upon the ground. One Arab would hold the corpse while the other twisted a

curved *jambiyya* into its anal passage. There it knelt, each diminutive cadaver, an atrocity in itself, with a big silver-plated bone handle sticking out. Other Arabs began piling stones around the bodies to keep them from falling over. Colwell's final thought before losing consciousness was that such a perverted act must have been contemplated before their arrival.

A shout came from a high point of land to the west, the same elevated plateau where, just two hours earlier, the unfortunate Yemenis had gathered for prayer. Sahallah listened to his sentry report a vehicle approaching from the west. Riley Gaven, who spoke passable Arabic, raised his eyes as a bolt of sheer panic struck home.

He had completely forgotten about Ambassador Lewis's visit.



CHAPTER TWO

When Dr Samuel Ignatius Bloom and his three colleagues who made up the Smithsonian botanical team were herded into the embassy conference room in Sana'a, Bloom was concerned. Had there been a problem with their visas? Seated, he leaned forward, anxious to hear what Ambassador Lewis had to say. It didn't take long for Sam to realize where Lewis was coming from. The man was lecturing them as if they were raw tourists. Of course they knew about the recent terrorist activity. Christ, the whole world knew what was going on in Yemen.

Anxious to get on the road as early as possible, Bloom gathered his impatience and tried to reason with Lewis. "Look, we just spent three days in London waiting for permission to enter the country. By now the specimens Dr Colwell uncovered may be beyond redemption. If we don't get moving soon, it'll probably be too late."

Norton Lewis, a heavysset black man in his early sixties, leaned back in his armchair and took a few puffs on his old briar before continuing. "I've been saying for months that Colwell's operation should be shut down until this current al-Qaeda resurgence is under control, so the moment I heard you boys were coming I lodged a formal protest. But the Smithsonian, it seems, got more pull with the State Department than I do. Now, you want to tell me why the hell messing around with a few bundles of dead plants is worth the risk?"

Bloom held Lewis's gaze and waited.

Lewis shifted around in his chair. "Okay, how long is this operation going to take?"

Bloom shrugged. "Two or three days."

The ambassador twisted his heavy features into a grimace. "You might have noticed that Islam and the U.S. government are not currently enjoying a cozy relationship. So here you are, more juicy American targets, wanting to go sniff dead flowers bang smack in the heart of cuckoo country. Not a good idea, gentlemen. Not a good idea at all."

A big grin spread across Jamie Patton's face. Youngest of the Smithsonian foursome, Jamie liked to tell stories. "This reminds me of when Smithy and ..."

Bloom raised his hand, cutting Patton short. Brevity wasn't in Jamie's dictionary, though at times he could be funnier than hell. A Richardson native, just outside Dallas, Patton had inherited a natural Texas drawl, so Bloom knew from experience the kid could take forever to tell a story. And this wasn't the time or the place.

Despite the team's lack of interest in his various warnings about al-Qaeda and the volatile Yemenis themselves, Norton Lewis insisted on speaking his piece. He realized these guys were anxious to get moving, but their security, after all, was his responsibility. Then he tried calling Colwell to let him know the botany team was on its way but couldn't make contact. "Not too surprising. The al-Mahara Governate was just added to the cellular network in September. Local boys are still trying to figure out how the system works."

He stared at the display a few seconds longer before closing the lid on his Ericsson T-28 World Phone. "No luck," he said, tossing the phone to Bloom. "You hang onto this one; call me if you run into problems. Colwell's number is coded in, the embassy's too. Which reminds me, Dr Colwell asked me to hustle out there soon as I can find time, something urgent, it seems. I had intended to accompany you gentlemen, but I was just told John Kerry would be calling in around four. God knows why."

"Maybe because he's gonna be your next boss," said Biff O'Malley, several shades darker than Lewis and a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat. "Man wants to get a handle on foreign affairs."

“From the horse’s mouth, you mean? Could be. Anyway, tell Colwell I’ll be there in the morning, okay? Should get in around zero nine hundred, provided we don’t encounter any major holdups at the checkpoints.”

Only then did the ambassador give them their *tasseries*, which they needed to get out of the city. These tour permits listed their final destination as Awwam, a small village nearest the excavation site and more importantly, allowed the four Americans passage through the many military roadblocks scattered around the countryside.

Leaving Sana’a, they’d meandered pleasantly through a lengthy patchwork of verdant fields before the landscape deteriorated into the type of terrain they were now traversing: dry, dull, dusty, hilly, a few mottled shrubs here and there but few signs of life. To the left the darkened tips of a range of mountains looked as if they had at one time been set ablaze, while on the right a series of small cliffs gave way to a shallow green wadi, and beyond, the desert. O’Malley commented that the landscape might have been transplanted from the far side of the moon.

Jamie Patton was looking very colorful decked out in a striped red and black Manchester United soccer jersey he’d purchased at the Harrods boutique inside Heathrow. Scruffy runners, worn and torn Levis, a maroon Tigers Woods cap perched backward on his head, was not exactly the getup one would expect to see on a Harvard gold medalist. “Looks to me like God’s formative attempt at creation,” he ventured softly. Yet the pale blue of the sky against the starkness of the land itself loaned a certain serenity and beauty to the scene.

Checkpoints were a nuisance, with every soldier at every stop wanting to examine their *tasseries*. That, plus having to honk their way through scattered flocks of sheep and donkeys loaded up with sticks and straw and *qat* made for slow going, and Bloom’s patience soon started to wear. Seated in front beside the driver, he tilted his Redskins cap to block out constant reflections from the rocks and gravel. For those old enough to remember, Sam Bloom was the face and eyes of Randolph Scott, which wasn’t that far off the mark, since both Scott and Gary Cooper pretty well defined the role of cowboy back in the forties and fifties. People were often surprised to learn that the tall, tough-looking American with the high cheekbones and square jawline was considered one of the world’s leading experts on exotic orchidaceae, with four

doctorates under his belt. But Sam Bloom had come of age on a ranch just south of Laramie, Wyoming, and was still a cowboy at heart.

Their late start wasn't all Lewis's fault by any means, Bloom considered as he waved at two youths tending a flock of sheep. They would have arrived at the embassy earlier but for O'Malley getting lost. Like Bloom, Biff O'Malley was ex-Nam and independent as hell. Like Bloom, he too had found a counterpoint to his previous life within the tranquil world of plants and flowers. O'Malley was hauled up, as he liked to tell it, in a little backwater swamp just east of Sarasota, well away from the rich and famous. He was as black as black can get, the several-generations-removed grandson of a Sudanese slave. Fifty-four years old, forty pounds overweight, he usually wore an old light blue duffer's hat and smoked six cigars a day. Bloom had kidnapped him from his current project, cataloging eastern Arctic flora, because he liked working with the guy. O'Malley had set out right after breakfast to explore the *Süg Al Milh* but realized too late that once away from the major thoroughfares street signs did not exist, so it was impossible to tell one narrow passage from the next. Lewis would later tell them the entire city was one giant maze; only those born and raised within its confines knew their way around the labyrinth. O'Malley never did find his own way out. Forced to swallow his pride, he'd waved a U.S. dollar bill at a group of Yemeni children and ten minutes later was back at the Sheraton Taj Sheba Hotel.

Winding their way through the heart of Islam, the general topic of discussion was not basketball, baseball, the problems in Iraq, the upcoming presidential election, or even the little-known world of rare and ancient flora. Three of the four men were discussing babies. Sam's wife Anna was expecting in August, while the Pattons were brand new parents. Jamie's daughter, Alicia, was just three weeks old, and Jamie couldn't stop talking about her. Biff O'Malley had four daughters: one from his first marriage, three from his second. His youngest daughter had just given birth to a *boy!* O'Malley was now an exuberant grandfather. Only Drew Snyder, with two grown children, held back from all the baby talk. A genuine chess freak, Snyder was curled up in the rear seat with the equipment boxes, CD headphone wrapped around his head, working a version of the Sicilian Defense on his laptop.

Their Land Cruiser, called *Layla Alawi* by the locals—reference to a popular Egyptian singer—ground to a sudden halt. The driver sat motionless with both hands on the steering wheel and stared straight ahead.

“What's wrong?” Bloom asked.

The Yemeni didn't answer. Following the driver's gaze, Sam picked up nothing unusual, just more of the same kind of hills they had been navigating since Marib.

“We must turn around!” Hassan said as he gunned the motor and spun the steering wheel.

Bloom grabbed the wheel and pulled the vehicle back on the road. “What the hell's the matter with you?” Lewis had warned them about al-Qaeda, but he also mentioned that local bandits were still plying their trade, and they especially loved western visitors. The ambassador had insisted they take along a few weapons. “Is it bandits?”

The driver seemed to cower under the words. His narrow shoulders touched the lumpy band of cloth tied around his head as he slid down in the seat. “Yes, I think is so,” he whispered in a hoarse voice. “Please, we must go at once.”

O'Malley leaned forward over the seat, grinning at Sam. “I heard these guys are as superstitious as all get out. Hey there, Hassan, what did you see, a man, or was it a ghost?”

“*Mush tamam asdigà*—no good, no good!” He tried again to get control of the steering wheel. “Please, we must leave this evil place, before it is too late.”

“How far to the site?” Jamie Patton wanted to know.

“It is here!” the driver replied as he sat bolt upright in the seat. He placed the Land Cruiser in neutral and applied the hand brake. “That small flat hill, you see, on the left side. This is the place of prayer.”

Then he opened the door, shouldered his automatic rifle, and walked away. Not back down the road but over a twenty-foot rise to the northwest and out of sight.

“I'll be a son of a bitch!” O'Malley said, plucking a cigar from one of many pockets in his safari jacket.

“Can't say we weren't warned,” Snyder commented as he closed the lid on his Toshiba. “Lewis told us these fellows could be unpredictable. Now we know.” Stepping out, he unzipped his fly as he strolled over to the side of the road.

“Didn’t Lewis tell us they got twenty soldiers onsite?” O’Malley said as he jammed the cigar into his mouth. “You figure those al-Qaeda characters might want to go pulling something in broad daylight?”

“Not too likely,” Bloom replied while scanning the terrain. “I imagine the same goes for bandits.” But he had to admit there was something freaky about their driver’s sudden desire to part company. A flickering shadow caught his attention. Looking up, he saw several large birds that looked like vultures winging their way toward the site. Which didn’t help matters.

Jamie Patton started to say something funny but changed his mind. “So maybe the guy isn’t crazy. After all, it’s his country. He knows a lot more than we do.” Patton reached behind him, feeling under the canvas cover for one of four M-2 carbines Lewis had loaned them. The magazine was empty, so he had to search around for a box of cartridges to load the weapon. Bloom watched him for a moment in silence before sliding over behind the wheel. His six two height forced him to push the seat back as far as it could go, then he waited until Snyder climbed back in beside him before shifting into low gear.

Bloom gunned the motor. Since he hadn’t touched a standard shift in years, it stalled. O’Malley’s ribbing made them all laugh and broke the tension.

Drawing closer, they were able to distinguish a lone figure standing on the prayer rock. A sentry. That was to be expected.

“Sort of tall for a Yemeni,” Patton ventured.

But Sam knew sky-lining could make anything look bigger than it was. Still, as they drew closer, the man did appear tall. It wasn’t the height that bothered him. The sentry was wearing a full-length robe the color of ivory, the same kind of outfit worn by Berbers in Algeria.

Suddenly, they were there.

In the few seconds it took to absorb the full impact of the scene unfolding before their eyes, it was too late. The rows of kneeling camels caught their attention first. Then the rows of kneeling men. Naked men, some with obscene implements jammed into their rear ends. Even aware of armed men approaching from behind, Sam was so paralyzed by the horror of it all that his foot slipped off the pedal and the vehicle stalled again.

“*Sweet Jesus!*” Biff O’Malley whispered.

Aware that he had led his men into a trap, Bloom scrambled to restart the motor. But the muzzle of a nasty-looking submachine gun prodded his left shoulder while its owner reached in to remove the keys.

Ahead and to the right, members of the expedition were huddled together beside several tents, in obvious shock. Two were kneeling attending to another. In the left foreground one of the Arabs, as they appeared to be, was dragging someone across the open ground toward the row of kneeling men. The victim struggled and screamed in vain.

Bloom's door was jerked open. A sharp bark left no doubt in anyone's mind that the Arab wanted them out. Sam stepped down, hands in the air. "I don't know what we've walked into here, gentlemen, but I think the order of the day is to play it cool."

"So much for our crazy driver—oh God, oh shit! Look what they're doing!"

Bloom had just noticed what Snyder was referring to: several Arabs using piles of rocks to keep the bodies from falling over, while two others were working their way up the line jamming great curved knives into the buttocks of the dead men. Why, he wondered, thinking it required a special kind of hatred to conceive and execute such a gruesome deed. That, or outright insanity. But the way these robed men were going about their business did not indicate anything other than quiet and effective industry.

Shocked by the horrific drama unfolding before his eyes, Bloom figured the body count at close to fifty. Then he saw the woman. A plump white creature lying stark naked on the ground with a hole in her forehead and a large knife handle sticking out from between her legs.

Only Jamie Patton had not stepped down from the Toyota. One of the Arabs went around to encourage him. "You'd better get out, Jamie," Bloom told him. "And don't think of using that gun."

Patton jerked his arm away from the stony-faced Arab and stepped to the ground.

"Gotta be al-Qaeda," O'Malley whispered. "Hitting on one of the soft targets Lewis had in mind."

"I expect you're right," Bloom replied, screwing up his face. "Bad timing on our part." Then he became aware of his mind automatically recording every detail as if his life depended on it: the perimeter, vehicles, trailers, tents, camels, various personnel, and so on. This was to be

expected, he knew, because many years ago, in another far away land, the American had found himself in similar situations. Sure, the players were different, as was the terrain itself but the circumstances were all too familiar. He watched one of the Arabs break away from the huddle beside the archaeologists and move toward them. The man's purposeful stride as he stepped through a pool of blood started Bloom's alarm bells clanging like crazy. The Arab came within twenty feet before pausing to snap an order at one of his men, the one who had been dragging a member of the expedition by his hair when the Americans first arrived.

The order was to silence the man's screaming, which was done by applying a rifle butt to his head. "Bloody noisy, these Iranians," he said, smiling, moving closer to the newcomers. "Take away their religious fanaticism and they become a herd of sniveling cowards. And whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

Bloom was startled by the man's crisp British accent. The meeting might be taking place on a street corner in London. His smile appeared to say, well, we have this little massacre in progress and so glad you were able to join us, because now we can kill you too.

Bloom studied the man, wondering if he was a Saudi. His height and sharp features belied any hint of Yemeni blood. But Sam knew precious little about the Arabian Peninsula, so the man might have been from anywhere. "We're botanists, here to take a look at the burial chambers located beneath the ruins."

The man raised an eyebrow and began to move in a tight circle around the American. "Burial chambers and botany do not go hand in hand. Please explain."

In light of the two rows of naked cadavers, his polite speech seemed to take on a surreal overtone. "Dr Colwell's team uncovered a significant amount of flora still in good condition," Bloom told him. "Our job is to classify and preserve what we can."

The Arab appeared to consider this for a moment before turning his attention to the other three botanists. When he plucked O'Malley's unlit cigar out of his mouth and threw it on the ground, Bloom locked eyes with his colleague, willing him to keep his cool. Then the Arab began a slow circuit of the Land Cruiser, allowing Sam the opportunity to search the anxious faces across the compound for Dr Colwell. Unable to spot the archaeologist, whom he knew from a photograph, he wondered now if the man was included in the long rows of bodies.

Bloom was scared shitless. He knew damned well the perpetrators of such a sadistic undertaking would not be leaving witnesses behind.

“So you are also American,” said the Arab, again facing Bloom. “And from Washington, D.C., the very soul of American decadence. Your name?”

American decadence! Bloom’s belly clenched and his jaw tightened. The future was looking very dark. “Sam Bloom.”

The man raised one thick eyebrow. “Indeed. Your luggage tag says *Doctor* Bloom, from the Smithsonian Institute. I suppose we should feel honored to have such an important individual among us.”

In the midst of so many corpses, his sarcasm seemed almost as foul as the slaughter surrounding them.

“I wonder if Dr Bloom has a cellular telephone?”

“Yeah. I suppose you’d like to have it.”

“If you wouldn’t mind.” He accepted the instrument from Bloom and placed it inside his robe. “And your colleagues, are they also carrying telephones?”

Bloom tried to keep his tone light. “Nope. I was given this one to keep in touch with the embassy—in case we ran into problems. Too late now, it seems.”

The Arab moved even closer to his quarry. Sam was now staring into eyes the color of deep bronze. They were impassive, reflecting nothing. Bloom took in the mighty hooked nose and the few strands of dark grayish hair sticking out from under the hood of his *djellaba*. Sam sucked in a deep breath when the Arab produced an automatic pistol.

“Look around and you will see the results of lying. I ask you therefore, to think before answering my next question. Why are you here?”

Bloom started to answer but stopped when he recalled the ambassador's comment about Colwell wanting him to see something. Something *urgent* was the way Lewis put it. Some kind of treasure? If so, had these guys somehow got wind of it? Bloom quickly rejected this notion, thinking it made more sense to link the killing of so many in such a diabolical fashion to al-Qaeda going about its everyday affairs, even if in this case the victims were mostly Yemeni. Whatever the reason, he sensed it was just a matter of time before he and his associates were also

slaughtered. Since he knew little enough about the Marib excavation, he was certain he did not possess any magic words that would save their lives.

But if I say nothing, he reasoned desperately, they might suspect I know something. Heart pounding in his chest, Sam replied, "We were not given the background to the archaeological aspect of the work Dr Colwell is doing here. Look in my briefcase and you'll find his original message on the burial chamber, plus all the paperwork relevant to this trip. There's nothing else I can tell you."

The Arab shrugged and walked away. A man used to making snap decisions, Bloom thought, struggling to control his shaking limbs. When the Arab summoned two of his men to lead the Americans over to join the others, Sam vividly recalled his first meeting with Anna Grenier, the beautiful woman who had consented to become his wife. A Swiss physician, Anna had succeeded where all others had failed, putting an end to thirty years of mental anguish and instability left over from the war. Sam had been taken prisoner, and tortured, on two separate occasions, his final experience extreme even by Cong standards. He had lived with those memories every day of his life until the miracle of Anna Grenier in Madagascar.

With death hovering close by once again, Sam prayed that her work had not been in vain.

Perhaps thinking they were being marched off to their deaths, Drew Snyder had grabbed hold of the rearview mirror with both hands and refused to let go. An Arab kept jabbing Snyder in the ribs with his gun, but Snyder hung on. By the time Sam realized Drew wasn't with them, it was too late.

The burst of automatic gunfire froze Sam to the spot. He desperately wanted to run back, to catch Snyder before he hit the ground. But these men were indiscriminate killers, who needed only the slightest excuse to pull the trigger. Going to Snyder's aid might prove fatal for all of them.

Bloom gripped O'Malley's arm, who looked like he was about to react. "Forget it, Biff!" he whispered urgently.

Poor Snyder looked down in surprise, then over at Sam. On Drew's T-shirt, the picture of sixteen-year-old daughter Lois downhill skiing in Quebec was swiftly being obliterated by her father's blood. Snyder slid down the side of the Land Cruiser without making a sound.

“These people are psychotic,” Jamie Patton said in a quivering voice. “There is so much evil here our driver didn't need to see anything. He could smell it.”

Bloom nodded as he stared into the defiant eyes of Snyder's killer, noting the man's pockmarked face and the insolent curl to his lip. Sam was staring on behalf of Snyder's widow Betty, his daughter Lois and his son Robert, all the while thinking, *Make the mistake of allowing me to live, that's all I ask!* Snyder had so many slugs in him, there was no hope he might still be alive. Even if by some miracle he was still breathing, they would finish him off. When Bloom realized he was trembling, the idea of a sudden relapse brought him close to tears. He could feel the familiar tension infiltrating his bones and struggled to hold himself together.

Turning back to the archaeological team, Bloom quickly regained the present when he recognized Dr Colwell stretched out on the ground. An older man and a young woman were attending to a bloody wound in his shoulder. Behind those three the remaining members of the group huddled together: nine men and three women, all in their twenties, some clutching each other while their colleagues continued to shiver and moan in outright terror, no doubt anticipating their own deaths. Seeing the Arab leader was talking with two of his men, Bloom took a chance and knelt down beside the archaeologist. Colwell's eyes were closed. “We're the botanical team from the Smithsonian,” Sam said by way of introduction. “Up to a minute ago there were four of us. How bad is he?”

The young woman, her face tear-stained, looked up. “I'm so sorry about your friend. He ... that ... that monster, murdered Henrietta, then shot Dr Colwell in the shoulder. He's lost a lot of blood, and the shock is severe. We have no real way of telling how much damage the bullet did until we get him into the medical tent.”

“Are you a physician?”

She shook her head. “I've had training as a paramedic.”

“They won't let you move him?”

The man kneeling beside Colwell said, “They won't even let us speak to them. Every time I start to say something, they yell and point their guns at us. I'm Riley Gaven, and this is Julie Newman. I apologize for the reception.”

Bloom nodded, then introduced Patton and O'Malley. "Either of you have any idea what this is all about?"

Gaven, a short, stocky man in his early fifties, shook his head. "Not the slightest—oh, oh, they're clearing out your vehicle."

Bloom turned in time to see an Arab hold up one of the M-2 carbines Lewis had loaned them. He asked Gaven, "You know who these maniacs are?"

"No," Gaven whispered. "The leader calls himself Sahallah."

"That fellow they were dragging across the ground, is he a member of your team?"

Gaven nodded. "Hamud, the poor devil. An Iranian."

Discovery of the M-2s resulted in some excited jabbering from several of the Arabs at once, a departure from their previous disciplined silence. This was followed by a series of shouting back and forth with someone up on the westerly plateau. Sahallah ripped out the radio mike and looked over in the direction of the Americans. Their Toyota Land Cruiser, belonging to the U.S. Embassy, was equipped with a standard mobile radio transmitter.

The Arab threw down the instrument, crushing it underfoot, then marched over to Bloom. Sam stood up when he saw the venomous look. The automatic was still in his hand and he thrust it into Bloom's face. "*Why do botanists carry weapons?*"

Sam gulped. The pistol's muzzle, still warm, touched the tip of his nose. "The ambassador insisted we take them along. He said bandits were not unusual in this part of the country."

"Why was one loaded?"

"No particular reason," he lied. "It just made sense to keep one loaded."

One of the Arabs came running across the open stretch of ground between the tents and the rows of Yemeni cadavers. The leader turned when he heard his man call out, then went to meet him.

"The one he is speaking to is the sentry," Gaven said. "They called him in when they found your radio."

Bloom asked, "You speak Arabic?"

"Yes. Something about your radio has upset them. Let me see if I can hear what they are discussing."

But the conversation ended so abruptly Gaven had no opportunity to eavesdrop. Within seconds Sahallah was again standing before Bloom. His face was contorted with rage. “You stopped at one kilometer back! You sent a message to Sana’a. Who did you call? What was said?”

“One of our guys had to take a leak, so we pulled in for a few minutes. I know nothing about the radio, or what frequencies are used. I don't even know if it works.” This was another lie, and Sam knew he was pressing his luck.

“You had a cellular telephone! You called Sana’a!” He raised the pistol again. “If you do not speak the truth I will kill you now.”

“No calls were made. But if I’d known what the hell was going on up here, I would have called in the goddamn Marines!”

Sahallah jammed his pistol into Bloom's forehead. “There were five men in your automobile. *Five!* Where is the fifth man?”

Christ! The sentry knew about their driver. “That's right,” Sam replied, working hard to keep his temper in check. “He was our Yemeni driver, a fellow the embassy uses from time to time. When we stopped, he just took off over the hill without a word. Not even a goodbye. Strangest thing I ever saw. Until we arrived here, that is.”

The American held his breath and waited. He had probably condemned poor Hassan to death, but the little man was armed, in hilly terrain, and by now a good distance away.

Sahallah’s features slowly came unwound. The pistol lowered, and with it Bloom's heart rate.

“Too bad *they* can’t talk,” the Arab said as he turned to leave. His left index finger was pointed upward. The vultures, many more now, were inscribing lazy circles directly overhead. Dinner was just about ready.

A series of swift orders saw two of Sahallah's men seize Dr Gaven and carry him into the largest tent. Another man walked around the Land Cruiser and shot out the tires, then ran across the courtyard to where the expedition’s vehicles were parked. Another burst of fire flattened their tires. Three more Arabs began removing packs from the kneeling camels, which appeared to be simple frames made of sticks tied together with rawhide and covered with canvas. Meanwhile,

the Iranian student had regained consciousness. Five Arabs positioned themselves in front of the remaining seventeen people. For a second Bloom thought it was game over, but the Arabs' relaxed posture told him otherwise. The fixing and impalement of Yemeni bodies now complete, the final few men who had been engaged in that activity lost no time joining their companions to help search the four aluminum trailers and several nearby tents belonging to the archaeological team. Several Arabs had already vanished inside the ruins.

Bloom watched, wondering. It *had* to be treasure, some kind of treasure. The five Arabs stood, impassive, guns at the ready, about twenty feet in front of the clustered foreigners. Julie Newman, the female student, was still attending Colwell, now awake and groaning. Slowly, so the gunmen could follow what he was doing, Bloom again lowered himself to his knees. O'Malley and Patton did the same. The other students looked on but didn't move. They appeared immobile.

"This is shit city, man," O'Malley whispered. "These good old boys gonna chew us up and spit out the bones."

Bloom's reply was interrupted by two quick shots. He watched as the Iranian, stripped naked now, fell to the ground. His screams soon mellowed to a kind of desperate moan, rising and falling as he made several attempts to get up. It was the sound of utter and complete despair, the sound of a man who knows he is about to die. *A sound Lieutenant Sam Bloom had heard too many times!* When the Iranian finally made it to his knees, one of the Arabs kicked him squarely in the face.

Julie placed her hands over her ears and looked away. Which was just as well, because what came next was the most barbaric act Bloom had ever witnessed.

Struggling hard to keep his past in check, to prevent it from suddenly taking control, Sam watched the man's raw guts spill over the sand and couldn't help but think, *Yeah, this is familiar territory. I've been here before. I saw the killing ground. Then it was the Orientals. Now it's the Arabs.*

As he watched, the memories began to surface, things he thought were long dead and buried. Struggling to stay in the present, he closed his eyes and pictured Anna, beautiful Anna, Anna pregnant with their first child.

Anna the widow!