

**The Language Stone**

# The Matriarchs

By

Philip Newman

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## Book I

### Meira & The Language Stone

*Meira & The Language Stone* is the first in The Matriarch series of novels in which we learn of the Ancients' use of solar energy, and of The Matriarchy, under which people lived long, purposeful, lives.

**The Matriarchs**

**Meira  
&**

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**THE  
LANGUAGE STONE**

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**by  
Philip Newman**

# The Language Stone

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## **The Matriarchs**

### **Christopher Jordan**

Although Meira McMahon is a fictional character, the technology of the Ancients' revealed in this story is proven, and is the subject of extensive research and analysis by Christopher Jordan, a science graduate of Sussex University. Of particular significance is the practical use of the spherical mirror, as illustrated by the Sothic Triangle, to do the work of the parabola, and of the pendulum, the Ank, to make its construction childishly simple. These two elements alone are sufficient to harness the Sun's energy to provide high temperature, scalable, and wholly manageable heat machines. If you factor in the Ancients' predilection for huge stones - the monoliths and megaliths, the pyramids and ziggurats, and the so called sacrificial altars – as energy storage devices, then their infinitely renewable, pollution free, total energy system stands out clear as day.

Meira and her friends are products of my imagination, but the science she shows us belongs to everyone; no one person owns it. Christopher Jordan has dug deep, and burrowed long to bring this simple technology back to the surface, so it is to him, and his persistence with the technology, that the stories of Meira are dedicated.

Philip Newman  
July 2004

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# Chapter One

Fiona McMahon settled into her wicker rocker as the Brisbane stilled between its lazy tides. From the back porch of her old Queenslander she could watch the river ebb and flow and measure the days by its rise and fall and by the traffic slipping quietly over its muddy brown surface. She lowered her eyes, blurring out the river's full sleepy swell and the tiny cross-river ferry bobbing toy like between the banks and allowed her mind to drift . . . . Meira would be shopping now . . . probably standing in the Indian greengrocery in Hardy Road testing poor Duval Singh about the freshness of his herbs and the quality of the spices she needed for the evening meal. It would be complex . . . Meira's meals were invariably complex Indian concoctions with at least five dishes plus popadoms, dhal, naan . . . .

Fiona settled lower in her chair as an odd mixture of sadness and excitement washed over her. Tugging at her heart was the loss of her child's innocence which in itself brought hope and excitement of things to come. She breathed deeply, soothing herself and taking comfort in the certain knowledge that the journey her daughter was about to undertake was inevitable; its dangers unavoidable, and were in any case essential elements in her preparation.

Her eyelids relaxed and her breathing slowed as she let her mind drift back over Meira's childhood, over the early school years in Beirut, college days here in Brisbane; the boys calling, the joys and tears of relationships, days with her father . . . what a wonderful man Hessnie turned out to be. What a wonderful choice of father for this special child . . . this very special young

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woman . . . .

She awoke much later and was immediately aware that the river had come alive, and was ebbing rapidly east now carrying the nutrients from land to sea; their progress marked by the slender channel markers raising bow waves in the swirling muddy currents. Blinking into consciousness she realized she must have slept as the river had slept, taken her nap as the old waterway had snoozed between ebb and flow. As her vision cleared a sleek blue and white river cat came sweeping downstream, her decks filled with returning city commuters, their minds full of evening meals, the test playing out its lengthy saga at the Wooloongabba Cricket Ground, kids at home with endless appetites, lawns to be mowed, fences to be fixed, cars to be washed, scouts, netball practice. . . comfortable, easy, everyday things that were no longer part of her life.

From the kitchen came the chopping and clattering of furious food preparation as Meira raised the tempo to signal her need for company. If she needed any confirmation that her period of tranquil communion was at an end Fiona found it in the exotic aromas wafting out to the deck, filling the tired old house with fresh promise.

Neither mother or daughter had spoken of Meira's decision to go in search of her father since she announced it and neither would until they thought the time was right, but it had left gaps. Conversations had been short; silences lengthy but were mildly comforting in their familiarity for they had never been voluble in their disputes. They were never demonstrative, there were no slammed doors or stamped feet because each

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preferred to leave the pot to cool rather than fuel an irrational fire. Theirs was still a long and deep love; one that had progressed over the years from that of mother and child, to adolescent and mentor, and in these later years, to an apparently growing equality as friends. It had been a fine beginning Fiona decided, but only a beginning.

She roused herself and stepped out along the veranda to the back hallway where the wall mirror allowed her to watch her daughter unobserved as she worked by the stove. She was wearing a loose fine cotton blouse over pale baggy jeans but it was easy to see she had gained weight in Hong Kong - probably the fine wine and dining, and why not? She was sexy, no doubt about it, and pretty. A foot-loose young woman should enjoy her beauty years, exploit those lusty suitors, and revel in romantic dinners and pompous cocktail parties aboard swanky yachts gracefully moored beside the Hong Kong Yacht Club.

Then there was Rodger; the one man. The one man who carried her away on whirlwind of parties and exciting romantic weekends to Taipei, Beijing, Tokyo and even a trip here, to Old Brissy to visit mother. It ended in tears of course as such intense relationships always do, and even if there was a loss of appetite for rich foods and romance for a while the drinking continued. It all added up, and ended up, on her hips pour child.

She had cut her hair in the aftermath of the Rodger debacle and it suited her, showing off the long neck and the classic high cheekbones she inherited from her grandmother. Her father had given her his olive skin and dark hair but Hessnie was a short man, not more than a hundred and sixty-seven centimeters and although

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Meira was taller than that, she was not a tall woman. This might have exaggerated the effect of her extra weight but she was by no means fat, and she had her own bright green eyes. Lucky girl. With those eyes and a comfortable bosom she would always be able to take her pick of the men.

The phone on the table beside her rang. She answered quickly. “Can I call you back?” A short pause and she hung up.

Leaning tentatively into the kitchen Fiona said, “Can I do something?” She did her best to sound submissive before Meira’s tight lips and determined demeanour but her daughter’s expression showed no sign of acknowledging it.

“You could lay the table. Find some glasses. Pull the cork.” Meira barely broke her concentration over the smoking wok but Fiona could see her mind was busy, her eyes roving over the spice jars scattered across the work surface. She wondered if she had used them all, and knew her daughter was wondering who it was on the phone, and why she had answered it so quickly and what she would do if she actually found her father.

“I still can’t get over your indifference mother. How can you be so unconcerned?” They were nearing the end of the meal, the final moves in a long ritual; the purpose all but achieved. “I know you care. I know you loved him, but you never seemed concerned at being deserted. I can’t get over that.”

Until now Fiona had said nothing - her daughter’s judgement being so unmistakable – but once their stomachs were full and their appetites satisfied

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there were no more barriers to the inevitable conversation. “If you have to go, you have to go,” Fiona’s tone was quietly resigned. “There’s nothing further I can do or say, except to be mindful of your business. Your father would not want you to neglect that.”

Meira turned on her, her eyes wide, her anger clear. “You speak as if he were still with us. You speak as if he is just around the corner, that he will be home at any minute.” Her frustration was bubbling to the surface as she held her gaze, staring hard, allowing the full force of her anger to be directed to her mother. “He deserted us mother. He walked out of this house nine years ago and you behave as if it were only yesterday. As if it never happened.”

Fiona recognised the anger deep within her daughter and could plainly see her frustration at hearing it all coming out wrong. Meira was angry, yes; angry with men, angry with her father, angry with Rodger – although she no longer considered him a man - but not with her. Rodger could go to hell and back but she did still miss her father, and she was both fearful and confused because she could tell that her mother did not share the pain.

Meira had in fact doted on her dad, listened to his every word, to each carefully articulated sentence so closely, so attentively as to be obsessive. In rapturous schoolgirl adoration she watched his soft brown eyes dancing back and forth as he adjusted the little mirrors in his laboratory, focussing the sun from the window onto whatever it was he was treating. It was for him that she worked so hard at the school in Beirut and even harder at the university in Brisbane. It was for him that after only two years she won two prizes, and then he left. How could he? How could he do that to her? These were the

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questions her daughter was now resolved to answer and had made it clear she would find him because she believed he was too big, too clever, and too active in business and government not to be seen or heard of again.

“He will turn up Mother, and I will find him. I will not be cheated of my father.”

Fiona busied herself with the plates; long used to these debates she was waiting for the angry words to die in the air. As they cleared the table, rinsed the dishes, she ventured, “Do you have to go tonight?”

“No, I do not have to go tonight. I might never have to go at all if you would open up. If you would give me some clue as to why my father, your husband of twenty-two years, suddenly, and without hint or warning, disappeared from our lives. But that is not the case, is it mother? You tell me nothing of your early life together. I have to guess. You have always behaved as if you knew why he had gone, and when he would return. But he never came back, and he never called or wrote. Did he? Did he?” It was a plea, a searching question and a cry for help in a rising, almost trill note, but Fiona left it there. She was expert at the unanswered question. There was nothing of value to say.

Meira dropped her shoulders in resignation. They had been over it too many times. “So I will go tonight. I will take the night flight to Bangkok and connect with the morning flight to Cairo and if he is still alive, I will find my father and wring his bloody neck for the pain he caused us. And if my business, his bloody business, in Hong Kong suffers while I am doing it, then to hell with it. I don’t like the damn jewellery business anyhow.”

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Out on the back deck the scene was familiar; a cigarette for Fiona, a second glass of wine for Meira, the Brisbane alive with the evening river cats slipping back into the city for movies, theatre, rich food in dark restaurants, dancing, romance, escapes . . . . “It’s not so long to Bangkok, less than nine hours. You might want to stay there a few days, see the temples, the floating market, Chinatown is really something in Bangkok. No need to hurry to Cairo, or anywhere for that matter.” She was sowing seeds on fallow ground she knew for history had shown that when her daughter was resolved, and she clearly was resolved, she would not be distracted.

Meira nodded in acknowledgement, and then they were in the street outside, the diesel cab rattling, her bags loaded, time ticking. In the warmth of that evening under a cloudless Queensland sky they hugged long; Fiona giving her daughter all she could. A taxi had seemed preferable to driving together in sombre silence to the airport but it had accelerated their parting, leaving them strangely naked and unprepared for the final moments. Softly they released each other, parting awkwardly, their eyes filling.

“I may not be long,” Meira sniffed. “I might find him quickly. I’ll call you from Cairo.”

Fiona smiled, and then it was only her. She was left to watch the cab’s brake lights flare at the junction to Vulture Street, then quietly disappear. She turned to the house, empty now, its purpose served. She had only to make the call.

“There was no stopping her. She’s as ready as she’ll ever be. It’s up to you now.” She hung up. Her life had changed.

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In the polished silence of the second floor corridor of the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior the dust of Cairo hung latent about the high brown walls. Figures moved silently between vast double doors closing with barely audible clicks in the soft haze of morning sunlight. On a long wooden bench two men sat talking, their bodies half turned toward each other, their knees almost touching.

“He went to the airport yesterday. He seemed to be waiting for someone, but no one came. He went home alone. It was nothing.” The younger of the two was speaking, wiping perspiration from his forehead with a damp handkerchief. Nadar Bin-Usef had always been a sweater; even in these huge hallways the humidity attacked him. He hated these meetings with Doumani; he always eyed him too intensely. He was doing it now. Nadar knew the older man thought him an imbecile, but still employed him, and his agency, and had continued to do so for the past eighteen months. It was a lucrative contract; Nadar could take contempt as long as the money was good.

“How did he travel?” Doumani said immediately, his eyes on Nadar’s for any hint of uncertainty.

“By taxi.”

“Both ways?”

“Yes. He kept the taxi running at the airport, then took it back to El-Taufiqiya.” Nadar had learnt to keep his answers short and factual.

“Where in El-Taufiqiya?”

“We lost him in the traffic”, he shrugged, the shoulders of his cheap, lightweight blue suit moving independently on his body. “He was probably just going for dinner.” It seemed no more than routine to Nadar, but he came personally to see the assistant minister because

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there was change in the target's behaviour pattern. Those were his orders. He and his operatives were to watch a man, Hessnie Mazou, around the clock, and report personally to the assistant minister every Monday morning at 8 am with the logs of the week's observations. He was also to report personally if there were any changes in Hessnie's routine. Always deferential to the assistant minister, he resisted the temptation to offer his opinion that a trip to the airport, possibly to meet someone who never arrived, did not seem so unusual, but he simply shrugged.

Doumani Bashir had long since resigned himself to Nadar's limited abilities and was constantly reminded of his limited education by his terrible use of colloquial Egyptian Arabic. Doumani chose to speak in carefully measured tones, precisely annunciating each word in Modern Standard Arabic. "Why would a man who lives in Misr El-Qadima take a taxi to the airport to meet someone when he could comfortably drive his car up the Salah Salem?" He paused, letting it sink in, then continued. "How many times in the last year has he taken a taxi to the airport, kept the taxi running and then taken it to El-Taufqiya for dinner?"

Nadar sank in his chair, his shirt collar dipping below the line of his suit, his expression acknowledging his inadequacy.

"When he left," Doumani drove on with sharp questioning, "Was he quick? Did he seem in a hurry? Did he linger anywhere? Did he look back?"

"He went quickly. No, he did not look back."

"Why not, do you think?" Doumani held Nadar with his eyes and was disappointed at the surprise he saw there; the question had not occurred to the man. Ruthlessly he pushed on, "If you were giving up waiting

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for someone would you not be concerned that you had missed them. Or that if you left you might be leaving too early? Would you not be looking around, searching the crowd in case you had missed something?” He waited for Nadar’s expression to change. There was only surprise, nothing more; not even confusion. “Did it not occur to you that he had seen what he wanted to see? That he had achieved his purpose?” Nadar sat up then, the light dawning. Doumani continued relentlessly. “Why would he have kept the taxi running when he could have caught another within five minutes? Did it not occur to you that he was following someone?” Nadar straightened his jacket then, smartening himself before his master. Doumani stood, ending the interrogation. “Start with the hotels where you lost him. Check the birth dates of everyone arriving yesterday. We are looking for someone twenty-five to thirty. Probably female. Probably of Arab extraction.”

Nadar scowled, his back curved under the weight of the task before him. Doumani picked up the warning sign immediately; this man could not be trusted. “Bring me a copy of the passport photo page of everyone in that age group, and do it in the next twenty-four hours.” The assistant minister turned and swept away without a backward glance. Nadar was dismissed; his stock below the horizon.

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Meira sat absently gazing at a large, off-white Mercedes two rows across the traffic lanes where the driver was vigorously picking his soft brown nose. Her mind was drifting over her recent decisions and why she

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should be there, immobile amid the honking Cairo morning traffic. It was her father's deep-rooted interest in all things ancient had introduced her to Egypt in the first instance and it was her mother's suggestion that if she was determined to go in search of him, then Cairo was the place to start. Not here though, she thought, not on a superficial tourist trip to the Giza pyramids. At the outset she had in mind libraries and museums where she would be talking to curates and academics who might have known him, seen him, struck up a conversation with a Lebanese man researching the pre-dynastic inhabitants along the Nile and its delta. Truth to tell she was tired. Even though the journey had been no more than sitting in aeroplanes and taxis and strolling through airports she was physically drained.

Perhaps it was her body calling for rest after that bad business with Rodger and the leaving of Hong Kong, and of course one more round of the old fight with mother. Whatever the reason she was treating this day as a day off, one in which she could sit back and allow herself to be amused by others, but a minibus trip to Cheops? Whatever happened to hairdos and facials, or spas for Chrissake? A soak in coconut milk followed by a wax job and pedicure would surely do better than this. Was she feeling so guilty that she had to start right away despite her irrational fatigue and so took this soft option just to be near her father's work?

Logic and rational thinking had long told her that he left of his own accord, that it was his decision, his fault, and that he was the deserter, not her. So why was she here, in this smelly bus in frantic search of someone who didn't want to be with her? Because, stupid girl, she reminded herself, you need to know. You have to find him, and tell him about the pain. You have to tell him about the lost nights, the days wondering by

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the river, the tears and the heartache and the rotten misery of her life since he dumped her. Damn, she was crying – in this bus full of strangers she was crying.

She sniffed her mind back to her immediate surroundings, distracting herself by focussing on the antics of the Mercedes driver who seemed to have almost finished cleaning the inside of his nose. Quietly she regained control of emotions but her thoughts were still on her father and what she would do when she found him; what she would say to him, or scream at him or hug him or whatever it took to let him know about her pain – God she actually wanted to embrace the bastard who deserted her, and her mother. It was absurd. To have all these ridiculous emotions churning around was absurd.

She turned her attention to her fellow passengers; a tour group complete with what looked like a Japanese honeymooning couple, two mature American men who, judging by the crass safari outfits and matching belts and cravats were a gay couple, and assorted other pairs who were the regular fare for such a tour. Cameras abounded along with sun hats and the stifling aromas of insect repellent and suntan lotion. Conversations over loud and childishly exuberant bounced around her, but having no neighbour on her seat, she was merely an observer.

A young man in front of her, further down in the opposite aisle, also seemed to be in his own world. Fiddling with some kind of shiny metal instruments. Could he be an engineer, or an archaeology student? His swarthy features, she guessed, were not Arabic, more likely Italian, or French. His profile was all she could make out as he kept turning the metal objects, examining each one carefully. His eyes were thoughtful, deep in concentration.

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Behind her was the man she had noticed at breakfast in her hotel pouring over a newspaper. Tall, lean, early sixties she guessed. He had wisdom in his face, and his blue eyes were bright, but he retained a look of failure, as if he had been overtaken by events. He was dressed in a cream cotton suit, and looked like the 1940's stereotypical English gentleman abroad. Did people really still dress like this? Obviously some did.

Inside Cheops the passage to the upper chamber was too low for her comfort, the flow of people travelling in the opposite direction rather frightening in its speed and volume, as if the returning people were in a hurry to exit; almost as if there was something undesirable behind them. The young Italian man, she decided on Italian rather than French, had forged ahead as soon as he could free himself of the thin-lipped - bright red lipstick – ever busy tour guide. This she realised was a feat in itself for the woman seemed fearful of losing someone, and possibly her job, so was constantly counting her group. The Italian though, managed to slip by this young mother hen with all the adroitness of a magician's assistant. His busy, dark eyes clearly relieved at the prospect of individual progress, he dashed away up the passage as if charged by some greater purpose.

Meira, content to stay with the crowd shuffling uncertainly into the depths of the huge structure, was never-the-less thankful when they emerged into a higher walled plateau where she could stand straight, and breathe more easily. From there they could either descend towards the lower chamber, or progress upward, via a gently turning stairway. She chose the latter but was disappointed when at the end of an arduous climb in the stagnant, airless interior, she found herself in what

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appeared at first glance to be an entirely unimpressive room.

She stood, waiting as her eyes adjusted to the poor light emitted by one grimy florescent in the far corner. As they did she realised the room was larger than she first thought, around five or six metres square, the ceiling two or more metres high. Curiously running her hand along the side-wall she found its surface to be impressively smooth and flat, the four corners of the room appearing to be at perfect right angles. She drew comfort from that. It implied order, intelligence, a high level of technology. She moved forward, towards the centre of the room, her eyes adjusted now, her vision improving. She let her eyes scan slowly around the walls, taking in the flatness, the symmetry of it all. She had nearly completed her orbit when she stopped suddenly, and for a second or more her heart stopped in unison. She adjusted her gaze as she took in the image of what appeared to be a body, a man's body, or at least the lower half of it, hanging deathly still from a hole in the furthest wall.

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# Chapter Two

Sir William Saint Thomas Houghton decided against entering the pyramid. He knew the interior as well as any man on the planet and therefore had no desire to venture into the low passageways to walk, inelegantly stooped, in an atmosphere created from five thousand years of pointedly human odours that had permeated the walls of Cheops. Instead he remained outside, taking shelter from the Cairo sun under a low awning over the dusty tables of the Café Giza, where he could sip cold beer and enjoy the doubtful benefit of a cigarette.

Sheer luck had brought him to this point he reflected. A routine trip to Cairo to keep an eye on whoever it was The Ministry of the Interior and Culture Affairs was keeping an eye on could not reasonably have been expected to plop Absalom McMahon, currently Hessnie Mazou, into his grateful lap, but it did. There he was, bold as brass, wandering into the lobby of the Cairo Hilton just as he was checking in himself, and if he was not mistaken with a wary eye on the same pretty little person who had his own immediate attention. Well, well, well, he had muttered to himself, what a delightful dilemma before me. Should I get a lock on old Absalom, or check out the dark haired young woman with the olive skin and unforgettable green eyes. My, my, is that a family likeness I see before me? Could this be the long lost daughter; the first of Absalom's family to surface

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after disappearing so inconveniently over nine years ago? If it is, best keep tabs on her - daddy will never be far away. If it is not, it could take a while to find the old boy again.

In the event he was able to do both. Absalom stayed long enough to see the young woman check into the hotel, then, after only a brief period of quietly watching the lobby, he slipped unobtrusively into the street where he made three complete circuits of the hotel block before hailing a cab. A nice try, but somewhat amateur. Whoever Absalom was on the lookout for it was not a rather incongruous European in a classic English summer suit - something to be said for being too obvious. He never came closer than a block to his quarry and cleverly saved himself considerable expense of effort by letting Absalom circumnavigate the hotel block all by himself. He had only to wait at the corners of the opposite block to see the little charade unfold and once in a cab he somewhat disappointingly made no attempt to check for anyone following. How very manageable of Absalom to go straight home to his little house in Misr El-Qadima without all the devious nonsense of back tracking and diving into alleyways, so popular with the criminal classes, and the young woman did even better. It was extremely unlikely that she had wandered around in the night because the tiny wooden marker he placed at her door before retiring was still there at seven in the morning. Which left him free to enjoy a leisurely breakfast while skimming all the way through the local rag before she appeared fresh and bright as a well-watered lettuce, and the dead spit of the old boy. Well, well, well, what luck.

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Meira remained stock still, her breathing slowing after the initial gasps at seeing a man's body dangling from the inside of the pyramid wall. She concentrated on regaining her composure; on gathering her wits. Then he moved, not much, just one foot but enough to tell her he was not actually dead, not yet anyway. She moved closer, curiosity overcoming her fear of the unknown in this strange and confining place.

"Hey, are you all right?" She called at the lump on the wall. No response. She moved closer. "Are you okay?" He remained face down in what she could now see was a square hole going deep into the wall; his arms were fully extended into it. It was her Italian man. Well not hers really, in fact not hers at all and she didn't even know if he was Italian. Remembering his preoccupation with his instruments on the bus she wondered if she should just leave him to it. Maybe he was intent on carving out a bit of rock for himself, a little souvenir perhaps. She tried one last time, "What you doing down in there? Is everything all right?"

This time he reacted, raising his head quickly, brushing a mop of wild, curly black hair against the roof of the hole as he extricated himself from its depths and bringing with it a cloud of grey pyramid dust. She stepped back. He looked over his shoulder at her, smiled a huge white grin, "Un momento, un momento signora."

He was Italian. She congratulated herself. Years of people watching, for lack of anything else to do in her student days, had not been completely wasted.

He lowered his head again to concentrate on whatever it was inside the hole. She watched as he grunted, rolled slightly to one side, then paused, his breathing clearly audible as he took long controlled breaths through his nose. Turning to face into the hole again he said, "Bah," or that is what she thought he said.

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He could have said, “Hah,” or, “Pah,” but she thought it was “Bah.” Then he pulled his upper torso out of the hole and squatted with his knees up under himself. “Mi scusi signora, mi puo aiutare per favore?.” She was unsure, trying to translate but her Italian was negligible. He continued, “Scusi, my apologies. Do you speak English?”

“Yes, yes I speak English.”

“Would you mind very much to help me please? I do not want to lose my instruments.”

She moved closer again, looking over his shoulder. “Sure. What do you want me to do?”

“Closer please. You have to kneel down here.”

She moved next to him, knelt, and peered past his arms into the hole. He was muscular and smelled of cologne and sweat mixed with the dead dust of the pyramid, “See, down the bottom on my right ‘and.” He dropped the aich beautifully. “See. See that instrument in my right ‘and? I am about to drop it. It will not come back if I do. Can you get it? My arms are too big to go in there. Can you get it?”

She leaned lower, reaching tentatively past him, her arms and shoulders pushing against his but she could not reach the shiny steel thing that looked like a small watch. “I can’t quite. . .” she stretched.

“Never mind,” he said. “Thank you for trying.”

“No, no. Wait a minute. Don’t let go.” She adjusted her position until she was laying flat on the floor of what was almost a tunnel, her breasts flat against the hard stone; her blouse probably filthy now. Reaching in and down her finger felt his as she took hold of the instrument. “I have it. Let go, I have it.”

He withdrew and sat up beside her. She remained kneeling on the floor. Gently he slipped his hands under her shoulders and raised her to a standing

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position. She leaned back against the wall, grinning at her success and opening her hand for him to take the little watch. “Grazie signorina. Molte grazie. I am in your debt.” She followed his eyes to her blouse and started brushing away the dirt. “You must let me pay for your cleaning,” he said. “And for lunch. I insist on returning your kindness. You have saved me from a great loss. My instruments are expensive, and mean much to me.”

“So I can see. But what were you doing in there? I am not used to finding men hanging out of holes in the walls of ancient buildings. Do you do this sort of thing often?”

“Si, si, signorina I do. I am a strange person. Always I am hanging out of tunnels, or laying around the floor of ancient buildings with my head down a hole. It is what I do.”

“As a hobby, or as a job?”

“It’s my job. I am an engineer. I was measuring the hole.”

“Oh, well,” she said dismissively. “That explains everything.”

“Si, si, I will explain everything. There is no secret. But not here. Over lunch I insist. I am Luca, Luca Morello,” he offered his hand, which seemed rather silly after the intimate contact they had just enjoyed. “Please, I insist, let me take you to lunch and all will be made clear.” She followed him out into the bright Egyptian sun.

Her phone rang at seven, right on the dot. Luca Morello was a punctual, and persistent man. She had turned down his lunch invitation because she was hoping to do some investigating – she had, after all, come here to find her father. This was not a vacation, and it

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definitely was not a time for romantic involvement - though lunch could hardly be construed that way. Still, she wanted to remain focused.

Once back at the hotel she felt tired again so allowed herself, only for a few moments, to flop on the bed. By the time she had awoken the afternoon sun was already low in the sky. She cursed herself for wasting the entire afternoon. Jet lag? Sure, a little, but to sleep for the entire afternoon? And after such an easy morning? She was still feeling useless - dammit, she had things to do.

When the phone rang she was not as irritated as she thought she might have been, in fact she welcomed it to break her from this lethargy. Returning in the tour bus that morning Luca had pressed invitations on her all the way to the hotel, but never lost his patient charm. Finally she matched his grace by agreeing to meet him for drinks in the early evening, and there he was, sound as bell she grinned. Picking up the phone she stifled a yawn, paced herself to tell him she would be down in a few minutes all the while assessing her face in the in the mirror and deciding what had to be done. A quick makeup job she decided, a brush and polish of the hair, and cloud of the Amuoage Gold she picked up in the Bangkok duty free and she would be ready. She pulled out an orange sundress from her suitcase, shook out the creases, and slipped it over her head.

It was a ten-minute ride by taxi to the restaurant but seemed like only two. She had been expecting drinks in the hotel, or at a nearby café, but Luca insisted that she see a little more of the city and it was hard to refuse his boyish plea, not after resisting all his lunch overtures. It was effortless for her with Luca content to make all the conversation, waving his arms at buildings and

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monuments he thought she might find of interest, while his rumpled white shirt became more wrinkled by the efforts and by the humidity in the cab. He smelled of a familiar men's cologne she could not identify but thanked her god that the sweat and pyramid dust was just a memory.

The taxi stopped beside the Nile just below El Manial Bridge from where it was a short walk to the floating restaurant. "I hope you do not mind the smell," he said, apologising as if it were something over which he had control, and then went on, as if he had to explain, "boats with food always create strong smells, don't you think?"

She had noticed neither the smell or the trend he was talking about but she had noticed the lights, the reflections on the glass and silverware and on the mirror behind the bar. She had noticed the moonlight on the water and on El Manial Palace and the glittering tower block of the Gezira Sheraton further up river. She had noticed the candle-lit boats hovering nearby with couples dining at private tables and the tour boats sliding by all a-glitter with pearl strings of multicoloured bulbs, but she had not noticed the tendency for food boats to smell badly. In fact, now he mentioned it, she did notice a smell, a smell sweeter than the deathly stale smell of the pyramids, or the dusty smell of the Cairo streets or the dank smell of the air conditioned dankness of her hotel room. She noticed now that the row upon row of baskets of orchids hanging over the boat's safety rails had a smell sweeter by far than anything she experienced since leaving Brisbane.

"It is beautiful," she said. "Absolutely beautiful. You must know Cairo well."

He smiled graciously and indicated to the hovering maître d' that he wanted a table on the

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riverside. Over a cocktail he stayed away from interrogating questions, concentrating instead on light banter about travel, airlines, restaurants, and the problems of Cairo.

“But you want to know why I had my head in a hole in the wall of Cheops upper chamber?”

She smiled encouragingly.

“Si, I will tell you. But first you must tell me something.” She smiled, conceded. He paused to watch her face, then continued. “Are you unhappy?”

“No,” she said quite confidently.

“Sad perhaps.”

“Not really. No, I would not say I was sad. Why would you think I was?”

“You are young, some years from thirty I think, vibrant, alive and curious.” Again he paused, measuring her expression, then finished the thought, “and on a mission, a lone mission in Cairo.”

There was no hiding from that. He had pressed the right button but she was loathed to reveal her plans to a stranger. Certainly she was not going to talk of Rodger and Hong Kong. That was all firmly behind her; there was no need to revisit the slamming doors, the violent outbursts, the deceit; the bloody humiliating damned deceit. Shit, he was spoiling the evening. Or was she just letting him. She had not turned from his gaze and was determined not to. She held his eyes – his soft brown eyes. “I see more sadness in you than I feel in my own heart. Perhaps I should be asking you such questions.” He broke the gaze with a blink, dismissing the moment with a smile that lit his whole face.

“Si, priego. Did you notice anything special about the hole?”

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For half a second she was fazed by the quick change of topic. “Oh, in the pyramid? Well, it looked long.”

“Yes, very deep. I don’t know how deep, more important though, it was perfect.”

“Perfect?”

“Si. It is perfectly straight. The walls are perfectly flat, and it is perfectly horizontal. Straight. That hole is dead straight.”

She thought about it, but was unsure of the significance. “Is that what you were measuring. How straight it was. . . is?”

“Yes. And the floor of the upper chamber, that is also straight, perfectly flat. The hole runs perfectly square to the wall, and the wall perfectly square to the floor. Perpendicular I think in English.”

“Yes, at ninety degrees.”

“Si, si, at ninety degrees to the vertical as far as my laser could see. Maybe more than one ‘undred feet.”

“You could see a hundred feet?”

“No. It is a small laser. It cannot see anymore than seventy, maybe eighty.”

“Is it a new hole?”

“No, no. It is as old as the pyramid. It was built that way.”

She paused only for a second. “Oh, the Egyptians had instruments as good as your laser?” She was teasing him now.

He leaned forward, his elbows on the table, one hand grasping his drink and answered with unconcealed enthusiasm, “It does mean that. It means that the Egyptians could measure to within hundredths of millimetres. It means that all the traditional theories that they used hammers, string soaked in acids, or wedging

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to cut their building blocks was stupid. Nonsense I think.”

She nodded, a little surprised at the rising passion in his voice. He took a sip from his drink. She did the same with hers. His behaviour reminded her of father’s when he was extolling his theories. Come to that, she was listening as she used to listen to her father. Would she also use Luca’s own words later to dispute his theories as she did with her father. Luca continued, “How do you think they made that beautiful hole? How do you think these people, who were supposed to be limited to bronze and brass, could make tools to cut perfectly straight holes through granite and basalt? How could that be?” She had not given it a thought. She had no idea but suspected he was about to offer one. “These people had sun technology,” he declared. “These people could control light beams - like lasers.”

Meira now had her arms crossed on the table, giving Luca a quizzical, ‘you’ve-got-to-be-kidding-me,’ look.

“ Si, si, they could. I am not crazy, they could. They did, you only have to look at the hole, they did it. And if they did not have high-speed diamond tipped cutters and grinders guided by laser beams, how did they do it? With wedges and ice fissures? I do not think so.”

“I suppose they could have melted the stone,” she said, calling on her jewellery expertise. “You can melt stone with laser light. Jewellers do it. People who synthesize stones use laser beams.”

“Ah, you know these things. Good. Si, you can cut stone with a light bulb if you have the right mirror. They do that. They did that at the Bureau of Mines, in the Twin Cities Research Centre in America. A scientist, David Lindroth, I think, he showed that a 100 watts of light energy focused to a tiny circle, about 2 millimetre,

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can cut any rock. The harder the rock the easier it gets because quartzite spalls very easily, while a rock like basalt does not spall, but melts.” He had lost her. Around about the 100 watt light bulb she drifted off. Undeterred, he paused only to wipe his mouth, his shirt cuff serving as a serviette, his mind far from the romantic supper on the Nile. “In Machu Picchu they have the same. The blocks are cut so exactly you could not put paper between them. And they had a golden mirror there, two man across they say, but the Conquistadores cut it up and melted it . . . of course. . .they could not allow anything to threaten the church.”

She smiled at his bubbling enthusiasm, quietly enjoying his passion. “I think we are going to need more wine for this. Please let me buy a bottle?”

“Of course I will let you, provided you let me pay for it.” He called the waiter and ordered before she could object. “I hope you are hungry. Excitement makes you hungry, yes? And this is exciting, yes?”

“Yes, I guess it is. If you’re saying that all the historians up until now have been talking nonsense, then it definitely is.” Her history was pretty good, especially middle-eastern history, early Bible works, and the creation of the Koran. If he was going to spout on about ancient Egyptians, and their sun gods all evening, she was going to indulge herself in some decent wine.

“Ancient people had a much higher technology than you would believe possible, much higher than we have been led to believe. That is what I think.”

The bottle arrived.

In the early morning they were still talking about the pyramids. He had ventured into the area of his wife, and the life he lived with her before he left her and their son, but Meira cut him short. She did not want that part

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of him. She did not want to share his past anymore than she wanted him to share hers. She wanted only the current bit, her bit, of him. Her own past was heavy enough for her at the moment.

Despite his insensitivity over the early part of dinner, Lucca had moved on to more charming topics. About his fellow airline passengers he was particularly funny and his assessment of the individuals in the tour bus had her laughing through most of the second bottle. Maybe he was just what she needed to shake off Hong Kong. At the door to her room he did not let up; his banter continued unabated until she kissed him, and allowed him in, and gave herself up to him in heady relief. No one had made to love to her more easily, simply, uncomplicated, and he was warm, and kind, and his big brown eyes hardly left her face, so she just relaxed and enjoyed him in soft, gentle orgasms into the small hours, and thence to sleep in absolute peace.

Over breakfast on her veranda he continued with his curiosity of the ancients. It was fascinating. The subject was fascinating, and watching the fire in his eyes and hearing the power in his voice was also fascinating. Given another time she might have, if not matched, then at least shared his interest. Right now though it was dull stuff. It was the dusty stuff of her schooldays, of people long since turned to ash by time and was of little interest to someone who lived so intensely in the immediate. She doubted she could develop his passion for the Pharaohs and the early Greeks and the wandering tales of Herodotus. Nor could she gather much concern for the early Britons, the builders of Stonehenge and the strange constructions in Ireland all of which added up to something special to Luca. Luca, if she was following the thread of his excitements correctly, was absolutely

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convinced that mankind was travelling in the wrong direction. That because we are burning irreplaceable fossilized fuel we are on a path to the destruction of the planet. Not just because of the pollution, but because of the wars it creates. Wars, according to Luca, were all based on the mightiest nation's need to take all the Earth's resources for itself. It was not an uncommon conclusion. Many people thought that way. Many stood on soapboxes and lectured to passing strangers in parks all over the world of the end being nigh, of the wrath of the gods, of the coming of the day of judgement. It all smacked of the sixties, of hippies and ban-the-bomb marchers, and she would have dropped it. She would have dropped Luca after one date for fear of his theories becoming repetitive, or worse, and would sully that she wanted to keep as beautiful romantic memory except something strange happened.

It was after breakfast while Luca was in the shower and she was glancing through the morning paper over the last of the coffee someone came into her room and started opening drawers and cupboards as if in search of something. She could hardly believe it. There she was at peace with the paper in her dressing gown on the veranda and suddenly there was this person, an Egyptian in a blue suit, clearly visible in her room, yet oblivious to her, and moving about as if he were alone. Her heart beat thumped out a scream, adrenalin pumping panic and fear she froze for a second, maybe two, while reason kicked in and she considered what to do. The urge to shout at him, to demand who he was and what he was doing welled up in her but she held back, her thoughts turning to the consequences of whether or not he might be armed and come at her in his own panic and fear at being caught. She froze in a limbo of indecision, but only for a second or so. He might be crazy, then

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again he might steal something, take her money, her purse with credit cards and tickets and passport, no, shit she would not have that. “What the fuck are you doing?” She yelled at the top of her voice. He turned, calm, his eyes steady, driving her to panic. She screamed. She screamed louder and longer and harder than she could ever remember screaming. Not that she had thought it all the way through to that point, but she was not surprised when Luca appeared from the bathroom wet and hairy and entirely naked. He took one look at the man and crashed into him, knocking him over in a rugby tackle that made him fall backwards over a low table and pinning him down as his knee went into his neck. This time it was the intruder’s turn to scream, not in the high pitched trill of a terrified female, this was the deep agonised victim’s cry for relief from intense pain cut short as the sharp corner of the table drove into his back and Luca’s knee jammed harder into his Adam’s apple.

Looking back on the incident she wished she had done no more than that initial scream. It was enough, after all, to bring out the beast in Luca, and what a beast he turned out to be, and it clearly immobilized the intruder; he was not going to make anymore trouble and who would probably have left chastened and empty handed. Instead she picked up the phone and yelled at the concierge.

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# Chapter Three

For her own modesty as much as Luca's she draped a towel over his hairy nudity as two anxious maids peered around the door. They circled the scene but made no attempt to clean up and it was not until the security guards arrived with popping eyes and cautious authority that Lucca finally relaxed his hold on the miserable soul now turned blue from pain and partial suffocation. He clasped the towel as he stood and with what she could only describe as Latin panache, and returned to the bathroom to dress. "Not so dusty Luca Marelllo," she thought to herself. "Not a dusty performance at all."

It was much later, in the relative silence that was the aftermath of the chattering maids, the stern commands of manhandling guards and the ever obsequious soothing of the duty managers, that she stepped quietly into the hissing shower. As she soothed in the vapours she gave thought to the hotel manager's pleaded invitation to his office and his request for help in completing his report. Carefully assembling her recollections of the sequence of events and of her feelings at the time, she became mildly confident of the orderliness of her memory so it was surprise that her confidence later sagged; that she found herself on the defensive.

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On entering the manager's hallowed quarters in the prime south-western corner of the second floor her self-assurance drooped a little as she was met by the polished representative of the government Department of the Interior. It drooped even further on meeting the tall, senior police officer with the bristling moustache who seemed entirely too grand a person to be taking an interest in a hotel room burglary.

The office though, was everything she expected; large, with an oversize desk of little purpose other than that of impressing the impressionable. The carpet looked dusty, the glass display cabinet with only a few shabby relics and two silver cups and an old sword also looked dusty, as did cabinet. The pen set and leather bound blotter definitely were dusty but the men in attendance were not; not in the least bit dusty. The hotel manager himself was sharp - though rotund - in his bright, spotless, dark grey suit complete with pocket handkerchief to match his perfect blue shirt. The policeman was even brighter in his dark blue uniform festooned with chrome pips and bars and buttons and chains. He was brighter than a new pin; his face was so clean and well shaven it made his hair appear dark enough to be dyed.

Seated painfully on a heavy wooden chair with an ornate wooden back was the long lean figure of Mr. Aziz, from the government office, whose light grey suit and white shirt appeared quite dull beside the others. He rose gracefully when she entered, and lowered himself again only after she settled opposite on a lower, but clearly more comfortable, chair. Mr. Aziz was distressed to hear of her experience, and was so glad someone was at hand to defend her. It was really not the kind of thing they wished upon tourists, or anyone for that matter, but tourists in particular because tourism is their life blood.

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They are no longer a nation of traders and shopkeepers as once described by a famous Englishman, and they are not blessed with a wealth of minerals for which to dig. They are simple museum keepers, guardians of the ancients, and wished only peace and enlightenment for their visitors. If he could be of assistance during her stay. . . how long would that be? His office was at her disposal. If there was anything in particular she wanted to see, somewhere special she wanted to go, someone she wished to consult, visit, he, and his staff were at her command. She thanked him for his consideration then they all sat silently while she felt the full force of the attention these influential men of Cairo could bring to bear upon a young female. If they were waiting for her to say something, to offer something, they would be disappointed. She was already feeling too exposed, too accountable for her presence. Finally the manager moved behind his desk, establishing his authority by taking his time. In response she stood, strolled to the window to gaze out on the Cairo streets, then turned so he was forced to talk to her against the glare of the midday sun. He faltered from his controlled stare, blinked, then gathered himself again in fresh concentration.

“How did the intruder get into your room, Miss McMahon?” He had seated himself and was taking up pen and paper. “Did you hear him enter?”

She did not, she told him, them; she was being formally interviewed by police and government and wondering why all the interest in one young female tourist who interrupted a burglar. She did not hear the door open, or see anyone come in. She was reading the paper and suddenly there he was.

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“Would you have heard the door open do you think? Was it so quiet that you would hear the door open if it was done quietly . . . say with a key?”

She thought that unlikely, what with the noise from the street and with curtains to deaden anything coming from the room. Certainly she could not hear her friend in the bathroom.

“Ah, yes, your friend . . .” he paused to check the name on the sheet before him. “Mr. Mareello, he attacked the man?”

“Well he knocked him over and pinned him down,” she said.

“Why? Was the man about to attack you?”

“No.”

“Perhaps he was about to attack Mr. Mareello?”

“I think not.” Where was this going?

“He tried to escape? He had something of yours of value?”

“No.” He was going through my room you arsehole; rifling through my stuff.

“Why then did Mr. Mareello attack the man do you think?”

She had not given any thought to that aspect - it seemed a perfectly normal thing to do to a burglar. Perhaps people in Cairo offer their burglars cups of coffee - black? No sugar? She grinned at her own humour, then wondered if they had seen it. “He was in my room.” She went on, having no problem raising some indignation, “He broke in and was going through my things. He should consider himself lucky he was not seriously hurt. People have been killed for being where they have no right to be.” Christ, the cheek of these bastards. Are they trying to say Luca attacked an innocent local citizen? Her blood was up now; she was

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not going to take shit from suits and shiny shoes for defending her property.

“He was hurt, Miss McMahon. He has a quite serious back injury, and his throat is so badly bruised and swollen he cannot eat. Why do you think Mr. Mareello was so forceful?”

Forceful. Forceful. I would like to have been so forceful. I’d have strangled the little fucker. “I imagine he was scared. I was scared. He might have had a knife, or a gun. He might have been a karate expert, a trained killer. When someone breaks into your room you are scared. Wouldn’t you be scared if someone broke into your room like that?”

“But he did not break into your room. There was no sign of a forced entry. He did not have a key, and he did not have anything in his pockets that he could have used to open the lock. Either your door was open, or someone let him in.”

What was he saying? She let him in? She was careless and left the door open? Or was he thinking she had two men in her room and they were fighting over her. Is that what this jumped up little prick was saying. That she had men galore and brought this trouble on herself. She stared at the manager, at the gold nameplate on his ridiculous desk. Mr. A’bdul Ben Habib. What a nasty piece of shit.

Her horror must have been obvious because he quickly changed tack, “Have you known Mr. Mareello for a long time, Miss McMahon?” Was that another slight? Further implication that she invited numerous strangers to her room and let them fight it out for her favours. She looked around at the men in the room, their eyes steady, passive, as if in judgement. These slimy men were judging her against their repressed little wives, devoid, most of them, of the most basic of human rights. She felt

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sick; she wanted to throw up there and then, which might not have been such a bad idea given their immaculate suits. Perhaps she could spread it evenly over their jackets and trousers so they would all leave here stinking of her digested food and all the booze she put away over the last fourteen hours.

She stood, barely able to control herself, but was surprised how calm she sounded. “I will check out of your hotel immediately. One is not only robbed in this hotel, one is insulted - this management is hostile to women. You can be sure I will speak to the tourist agencies about it. Goodbye Mr. Habib.”

Habib glanced quickly at Aziz, and then the policeman to whom she was never introduced. “Please,” he said, rising and coming around the desk to intercept her. “Please forgive me. I was carried away by my own line of questioning. There was no intention to offend you. Please, please, do not leave. There will be no charge for your room. Please stay for the rest of your time in Cairo with the compliments of the hotel. It has been a most unfortunate incident. We are all a little upset.”

She paused, catching her breath, the blood slowing in her neck and cheeks. Habib looked extremely contrite, holding his hands before her and looking up because she was the taller; she had power over him. “Please, charge your meals to the room, it is the least we can do,” his eyes were beseeching, as if he was under threat himself. She would have to have been stubborn to refuse; besides a few nights on the house might not be so bad, it would give her time to find out what happened to Luca in all this.

It might have been because of the hunger she had failed to recognise until she had left the manager’s

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office, or it might have been because of her new, inner determination to take full advantage of Habib's offer and effectively punish his slimy behaviour, that she became so completely immersed in the menu. Whatever the reason, she had failed to see the approaching tall Englishman until he was at her table, hovering over her. "Please excuse my rudeness," he began, "but I believe I can be of assistance."

She looked up, quickly taking in the image before her and was immediately struck by thought that if he had a hat to raise he would have raised it there and then to complete the picture. As it was he just stood there and she just stared back, struggling to understand his offer. "Thank you," she said automatically, "but I think I can order my lunch - even at this hour."

He smiled and nodded graciously at her Australian directness. "I know something of matters of security," he offered, "especially in hotels, and more especially here in Cairo."

Still she did not understand his purpose. He was too elegant and mature to be trying to pick her up, yet there he was hanging about for an invitation to join her.

"My name is Bill Houghton," he went on. "I consult to businesses on matters of security sometimes, and I could not help hearing of your burglar." He placed a hand on the back of chair giving her another chance to invite him to sit. When she did not he said, "Do you mind?" and began pulling out the chair across from her. She did not object, so he sat with unobtrusive elegance. "Burglaries are rarely conducted randomly," he continued. "There is usually a purpose - some planning at least." He reached in his jacket and pulled out a white card and presented it smiling, as if by so doing he had justified his claim.

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She took the card smiling similarly to say she was enjoying the game. Reading slowly her grin deepened at the pretentious name but was brought up by the KG after it and the British Government portcullis in the corner.

“Are you a knight?” she asked. “Sir William?”

“Bill will be fine,” he said, his smile firmly in place. “I was hoping I could be of assistance.”

“You were on the bus to Cheops.” She watched as he smiled in acknowledgement. “But you did not go inside.”

“You are observant.”

“Well hardly. There were only eleven of us on the bus, and most of them were couples of some sort.” Her eyes were all over him as he silently acknowledged her observations. “So why would you go, and not go, as it were, or have you seen all you need to see of the inside of Cheops?”

“Indeed I have seen the inside of Cheops many times. Only now am I learning of the outside. Did you know it reportedly had three white sides?”

“As a matter of fact I did,” she grinned mischievously. “And that the white sides were finished in highly reflective marble and granite, and that the black side was probably obsidian.”

“Well, well,” he retreated. “I am clearly before an expert. Can I move onto safer ground, like the menu?”

She ordered a banana shake and a club sandwich while he took tea, over which she confessed to the fact that her knowledge was newly found through Luca and that despite her father’s interest, she found it rather dull stuff. He picked up on her reference to her father and to her surprise she let him in. Not to his absence, she would not go that far, but to his wealth of knowledge of the

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Arab and Jewish world, his passion for precious stones, which she shared, and to his devotion to her education, for which she was now grateful.

He switched subjects, “How did it go with old Aziz?” It caught her unaware. For a second she fumbled, then caught the ball.

“Aziz was oily, and that old bastard Habib wanted to lay it on me.” It was out of her mouth before she realized. She clamped her lips but it was too late; this was not at all how she should be speaking to a knight of the British Empire. He was disarming though; he had a warmth, and a powerful reassurance about him that made her want to open up. “It was a reception committee. Aziz from the ministry of something and what looked like a high ranking policeman. If they were there to intimidate me, they succeeded. They looked like heavy hitters.”

He nodded knowingly and appeared genuinely concerned for her feelings. “Tell me about the policeman.”

“He was tall,” she reflected. “Well built, dark moustache and enough pips and bars on his uniform to sink a ship.” She looked at the eyes across the table where Bill waited, listening. “He didn’t say anything though. Just sat in the background. Apart from the ministry man’s opening speech, Habib did all the talking.”

“Sounds like Colonel Masoud. You have stirred them up.”

“A knight, and now a police colonel. What have I done to deserve such attention?” She was being flippant she knew, but it was not the way she was feeling. Inside she was scared and very glad this Bill person was on her side. “Would you like some more tea?”

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Perhaps something to eat. It's on me, or rather it's on the hotel. I am to charge everything, including the room."

"My, my, what did you say to them?"

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Hessnie Mazou knew his death was imminent; it could be no other way. From the moment Fiona called he knew his time on the planet was reduced to only a few days – a week at the most. Now, after his visit to the airport and her hotel it could be no more than an hour or so, but it had been worth it just to see his baby one more time. It had been worth it for just one more look at that face, those hands, the eyes; for just one more look at her mother's emerald eyes it had been worth it. He could leave this life now in the peace that he had done his job, seen it through. One final act and he would be on his way.

Until then he could reminisce, reflect a while. . . . Meira was a listener; a keen student and loving daughter for sure, but above all else she was an ardent listener and her mental filing system he thought to be a thing of great beauty. She could recall information almost as fast as she could assess the need. Ears pinned back – she used to push her hair back from her ears when she wanted to concentrate – she would fix him with her green stare and soak up every word as he lovingly dropped his pearls into her growing pool of knowledge.

He had equipped her as best he could with a thorough understanding of the early Arab and Greek worlds; taught her about the use of mirrors to harness the sun's energy and some rudimentary solar technologies, and seen her into the western education system in Australia. The rest had come from her mother.

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In time she would forgive him for leaving; when she knew so much more she would understand. For now though she had to remain angry. He would go to his death without her love; there was no other way.

There was no other way but . . . he changed tack. It had taken them far longer to find him than he had first thought. Nine years on the run from some of the sharpest bounty hunters in the world was pretty good for an old Arab. It was certainly long enough for Fiona to complete the first part of her work. Yes, yes his work was done. It was done and he could relax. He could relax but if there was a chance . . . if there was a chance it he could meet her, speak to her . . . one more time before he went . . . just to see her smile again. Just to see that little face he used to watch as she slept in the peace and security of infancy. . . . That would be nice.