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THE EMPRESS HOLDS THE KEY

Gabriel Farago

Chapter 26

Sheikh Omar covered his face with his scarf and looked through the gap in the temple wall. *Excellent*, he thought. The late arrivals were being seated. *Let the show begin!*

A hush fell over the excited spectators, anticipation growing with every heartbeat. Then, softly at first, Verdi's stirring music began to rise up. Instead of a parting curtain, beams of coloured light washed over the stage. Slowly, the performers materialised out of the gloom and the spellbound audience began to clap and cheer.

The high priest, Ramfis, an Italian bass, was telling the Captain of the Guard, Radames, a famous American tenor, that the gods had already made their choice. *Celeste Aida*, the sublime aria, brought the house down.

'I don't like it,' muttered Haddad, scanning the empty space under the TV transmission towers with his opera glasses. He was searching in vain for the security guards supposed to patrol that area.

'But he was magnificent,' protested Jana, applauding enthusiastically.

'I'm not talking about the singing.'

'What do you mean?'

'Gut feeling; you know how it is. After a while you see trouble brewing everywhere,' replied Haddad quietly, without removing his glasses. 'This place is one big trap and we are sitting right in the middle of it.'

Something cold tingled down Jana's spine. There was an odd familiarity about the feeling and she reached instinctively for the scar on her left shoulder. The old bullet wound was a permanent reminder of a stake-out gone terribly wrong. This only heightened her apprehension and tiny beads of perspiration began to appear on her upper lip.

Danger, she thought. *There's real danger here. That's what he means.* Jana turned towards Carrington, sitting to her right. She wanted to warn him about something, but didn't know how. Her throat went dry and she began to cough. Carrington looked at her and smiled without noticing her distress. Gradually, the applause ebbed away, the lights went out again and the wonderful music continued.

Then suddenly the darkness parted and a procession of torchbearers marched through a narrow gap in the temple wall. They were followed by Sudanese drummers wearing only leopard skin loin cloths, their black bodies casting flickering shadows across the spectators sitting in the front. The highlight of the opera, the famous Victory March, had begun.

By the time the decorated war elephants made their entry, the cheering crowd was on its feet. The producers had achieved their objective: the spectators had spontaneously turned into participants. Jana, too, was swept up by the excitement of the moment, temporarily forgetting the disturbing premonition.

The first explosion almost went unnoticed. A grenade dropped from the top of the TV transmission tower at the back of the audience ripped into the unsuspecting spectators applauding below. Sheikh Omar looked at his watch and nodded. 'Allah, be praised, it has begun,' he whispered excitedly and reached for the scimitar hidden between the copious folds of his robe. The touch of the razor-sharp blade appeared to calm him. It was a promise of things to come.

Haddad's trained ear had picked up the vibrations of the unusual thud. Turning his head, he saw a flash of yellow light out of the corner of his eye. He realised instantly what it was.

Then a second grenade exploded, spraying the spectators with a deadly shower of hot shrapnel and body parts.

The orchestra is next, thought Sheikh Omar, listening to the screams of the maimed and dying. The young suicide bomber playing in the orchestra turned towards Mecca, prepared himself for paradise and detonated the explosives strapped to his chest. The force of the blast turned musical instruments into whistling messengers of death and sent twisted kettle drums and trombones flying – some with hands still attached and dripping with blood. A piece of the harp severed the power cables under the stage. Spewing sparks and hissing madly, the cables twisted and turned like a headless hydra fighting a phantom.

A young man marching behind the elephants whispered ‘*Allah akbar*’ and pulled a grenade out of his robes.

‘Get down!’ shouted Haddad. He reached for his gun and began to fire. As the gun went off, Jana tripped, hit her head on the metal seat next to her and fell face down to the ground.

Haddad shot the man holding the grenade in the head, but was a fraction of a second too late. Just before he died, the young martyr pulled the detonation cord attached to his suicide vest and turned himself into a human bomb. A particularly nasty bomb, designed to cause maximum damage at close range.

A long, bent nail grazed Carrington’s forehead, glanced off his temple and entered Isabella’s eye. Instinctively, Elizabeth Carrington threw herself forward, trying to shield her injured daughter. Moments later, a handful of ball bearings slammed into her back, killing her instantly. Bleeding profusely, Isabella collapsed on top of her unconscious father, her body ripped apart by a second blast of deadly shrapnel just before she died.

The trained elephants turned into frightened beasts and began to stampede, carving a trail of destruction through the rows of screaming spectators. Instead of protecting the guests, the bewildered soldiers were adding to the confusion by firing their weapons aimlessly into the air, unable to identify their foe.

The stallions pulling the chariot bolted. Radames lost his grip on the reins and was thrown sideways onto the burning stage. Momentarily trapped by the chariot, the terrified elephants smashed the wooden cart with the lions’ cage to pieces. The cage tipped over, pinning Radames to the ground under its heavy frame.

One more, thought Sheikh Omar, just as the last suicide bomber blew himself up at the exit, *and then it’s time!* Satisfied, he looked around: the carnage was complete. The right moment had arrived.

Sheikh Omar took a deep breath and reached for his sword, his hand trembling with excitement. To show his followers that he was truly the *Chosen One*, he needed an act of symbolic significance. He was determined not disappoint them. What he was about to do, in plain view of the world watching his every move, would be etched into the memory of millions for decades to come.

Before stepping out of the shadows, he adjusted his turban and scarf to hide his face and then walked slowly across to Radames.

The Captain of the Guard was still alive. Standing over him like an avenging angel, Sheikh Omar raised his gleaming scimitar up high. For what seemed an eternity, the razor-sharp blade stood still, reflecting the flames devouring the stage behind him. Then, shouting, ‘*Allah akbar*,’ he brought the heavy blade swiftly down, cutting off Radames’ head with one clean stroke.

The triumphant executioner turned towards the TV cameras – face concealed, but eyes

burning with zeal – and pointed the tip of his sword to the bloody head lying at his feet. It was an unmistakable message sent to the living rooms of a gasping world. For an instant he stood quite still, like a statue, and then vanished into the darkness, like a ghost.

****** End of Chapter Excerpt ******

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