

THE STOLEN ALTARPIECE

Jack Rogan Mysteries Book 8

Gabriel Farago

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The concert, Muscat Harbour: 15 January

Irina stood on the upper deck of the *Standard*, which gave her an uninterrupted view of the concert venue and the Al Jalali Fort lit up like a stage behind it. Once a prison but now a private museum, the Portuguese fortification had protected Old Muscat for centuries and had a long and bloody history.

It should all be done by now, she thought and looked at her watch again. O'Hara had called several times already, desperate for news he could incorporate into his darknet gambling scenario, which was reaching a betting climax.

Initially, Irina had had second thoughts about O'Hara's crazy plan and its obvious risks, but in the end she relented because the daring idea appealed to her as it reminded her of assignments she had successfully tackled in her younger years at the KGB. In some ways she wasn't so different from an ageing rock star like Isis looking forward to a performance that would once again propel her into the limelight.

The invited guests had taken their seats in the cordoned-off area with rows of portable, tiered seating reserved for VIPs, but the huge crowd lining the harbour foreshores was getting restless and noisy while waiting behind barricades for the concert to begin. Free public concerts featuring a megastar like Isis were rare in Muscat, and eager spectators had arrived hours earlier to secure a place with a good view.

At ten o'clock sharp, the concert venue was plunged into darkness except for a spotlight illuminating the empty stage near the water's edge, a clear signal the performance was about to begin. The conductor had taken up his position facing the orchestra in front of the stage. He raised his baton as coloured lights came on, flooding the symphony orchestra with light as the first bars of Rimsky-Korsakov's stirring *Scheherazade* echoed through the loudspeakers and enthusiastic applause erupted from all sides. A few moments later, Khan walked up to the microphone on the stage and held up his hand. The music continued, but softer, and almost melted into the background as Khan began to speak.

'A long time ago, a sailor called Sinbad set out on a long journey from Baghdad to

explore the world. Along the way he had many adventures and supernatural encounters. On one occasion he landed on an island after a storm, only to find that the island was the back of a huge sleeping whale with palm trees growing on top.'

Khan paused as the sublime music became louder, conjuring up images of sea monsters, bloody battles and danger, only to fade away again after a while.

Bartolli turned to Jack sitting next to her. 'Magic, don't you think?'

'Sure is. I wonder how Isis is going to fit into all this.'

'You'll find out in a moment,' said Tristan. '*Watch.*'

'According to stories still being told in the desert, Sinbad sailed past these very shores on a vessel very similar to this one,' continued Khan. He turned to his right and pointed to the harbour as a beam of light raced across the dark water and came to rest on the slanted triangular sails of a traditional dhow sailing towards him. The music became louder as the vessel approached and tied up at a wooden wharf near the stage.

As Khan held up his hand again, the music stopped and the lights went out, plunging the stage and the orchestra into darkness, the sudden silence causing tension and anticipation, and making the illuminated vessel appear almost ghostlike and surreal.

Suddenly, the mesmerising beat of a drum came floating out of the darkness like the heartbeat of a giant. As the drumbeat became louder and more urgent, a figure appeared on the deck of the dhow. Dressed in baggy, wide-legged red trousers, a loose embroidered shirt and an emerald-green turban, the figure jumped onto the wharf and pointed towards the fort. Projected by laser lights, a floating Persian carpet appeared like magic and moved slowly along the walls of the fort before coming to rest on one of its ramparts. Then a beam of blue light illuminated first a drummer, then two guitarists standing on top of the ramparts, their long grey hair moving gently in the evening breeze.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' said Khan, his voice booming out of the darkness through the speakers, 'Isis and The Time Machine!'

The crowd erupted in cheers and applause as the guitars screamed into life, playing the introduction of 'Resurrection', one of Isis's biggest hits. As the orchestra joined in, the carpet moved on, descended from the ramparts and, hovering just above the ground, began to float towards the lonely figure standing on the wharf. Isis stepped onto the

carpet at her feet and, appearing to float, started walking towards the stage, the clever illusion adding to the drama as Isis began to sing.

‘*Wow!*’ said Jack. ‘What an entrance. I think this is even better than Mexico. Amazing what you can do with laser lights these days.’

‘She certainly hasn’t lost her touch. What do you make of those guys playing on top of the ramparts?’ said Lola.

‘The original Time Machine? Incredible! They must be well into their sixties. A magic carpet ride in more ways than one. Just look at that crowd,’ said Jack, clapping enthusiastically. ‘She has them eating out of her hands.’

Irina heard footsteps on the deck behind her and turned around. ‘All done?’ she said to her Chechen agents walking towards her.

‘Without a hitch,’ said one of the agents. ‘The concert was the perfect distraction, especially at the hotel. Everyone was preoccupied. We were invisible and had no trouble getting in.’

‘Everything recorded?’

‘Of course,’

‘Excellent. Did you upload the video?’

‘Yes. It’s ready to go.’

‘I’ll have a look at it later before we send it to O’Hara.’ Irina pointed to a bottle of vodka on the table in front of her. ‘But first, let’s have a drink. We leave as soon as the concert’s over. After that, all that’s left is a phone call to the local police. I hope Mr Rogan is enjoying the concert and his last few hours of freedom.’

‘And perhaps one last use of his right hand? What do you think?’ said one of the agents, laughing.

‘In a crazy country like this with its brutal medieval practices? You never know,’ said Irina.

One of the agents handed Irina a tumbler of vodka. She turned towards the illuminated stage and raised her glass just as Isis launched into ‘Dead Girl Walking’, another of her mega hits. *How appropriate*, thought Irina and smiled. ‘To Jack Rogan, a dead man walking,’ she said. ‘*Na Zdorovie!*’

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

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