
THE FINAL MISSION
**ALEX
RIDER**
SCORPIA RISING

ANTHONY HOROWITZ

PHILOMEL BOOKS

AN IMPRINT OF PENGUIN GROUP (USA) INC.

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Dedicated to every reader who set out

on this journey with me and who has now

come to its end.

PART ONE

SCORPIA

1

STOLEN GODS

THE MAN IN THE BLACK CASHMERE coat climbed down the steps of his private, six-seater Learjet 40 and stood for a moment, his breath frosting in the chill morning air. He glanced across the tarmac as a refueling truck rumbled past. In the distance, two men in yellow were standing, talking, in front of a hangar. Otherwise, he seemed to be alone. Ahead of him, a sign read Welcome to London's City Airport, and beneath it an open door beckoned, leading to immigration. He headed for it, completely unaware that he was being watched every step of the way.

The man was in his fifties, bald and expressionless. Inside the terminal, he gave his passport to the official and watched with blank eyes as it was examined and handed back, then continued on his way. He had no luggage. There was a black limousine waiting for him outside with a gray-suited chauffeur behind the wheel. The man offered no greeting as he got in nor did he speak as they set off, following the curve of the River Thames up toward Canning Town and on toward the center of London itself.

His name was Zeljan Kurst and he was wanted by the police in seventeen different countries. He was the chief executive of the international criminal organization known as Scorpia, and as far as it was known, he had never actually been seen on the streets of London. However, MI6 had been tipped off that he was coming. They had been waiting for him to land. The passport official was one of their agents. They were following him now.

"Heading west on the A13 Commercial Road toward Whitechapel. Car three, take over at the next intersection."

"Car three moving into position."

"Okay. Dropping back."

The disembodied voices bounced across the airwaves on a channel so secret that anyone trying to tune in without the necessary filters would have heard only the hiss of static. It would have been easier to have arrested Kurst at the airport. He could have been made to disappear in five seconds, bundled out in a crate and never seen again. But it had been decided, at the very highest level, to follow him and see where he went. For the head of Scorpia to be in England at all was remarkable. For him to be on his own, and on his way to a meeting, was beyond belief.

Zeljan Kurst was not aware that he was surrounded. He had no idea that his flight plan had been leaked by one of his own people in return for a complete change of identity and a new life in Panama. But even so, he was uneasy. Everything had told him that he shouldn't be here. When the invitation had first arrived on his desk, delivered by a series of middlemen and traveling halfway around the world and back again, he had thought about refusing.

He was not an errand boy. He couldn't be summoned like a waiter in a restaurant. But then he had reconsidered.

When the fourth-richest man in the world asks you to meet him, and pays you one million dollars just to turn up, it might be worth it to hear what he has to say.

“We're on High Holborn. Car four moving to intercept.”

“Wait a minute. Wait a minute. He's turning off.”

The limousine had crossed the main road and entered a narrow street full of old-fashioned shops and cafés. The move had taken the MI6 men by surprise, and for a moment there was panic as they struggled to catch up. Two of their cars swerved across the traffic—to a blast of horns—and plunged in after it. They were just in time to see the limousine stop and Zeljan Kurst get out.

“Car four, where are you?” The voice was suddenly urgent. “Where is the target?”

A pause. Then—“He's entering the British Museum.”

It was true. Kurst had passed through the gates and was crossing the open area in front of the famous building that rose up ahead of him, its huge pillars stretching from one side to the other. He was carrying an ebony walking stick that measured out his progress, rapping against the concrete. The MI6 men were already piling out of their own cars, but they were too late. Even as they watched from the other side of the gates, Kurst disappeared into the building, and they knew that if they didn't act swiftly, they would lose him for good. There was more than one way out. It was unlikely that the Scorpia man would have traveled all the way to England just to look at an exhibit. He might have gone inside deliberately to lose them.

“He's inside the museum. Cars one, two, and three, surround the building. Watch all possible exits. We need immediate backup.”

Someone had taken charge. But whoever it was, his voice sounded high-pitched and uncertain. It was eleven o'clock on a bright February morning. The museum would be crowded with tourists and schoolchildren. If there was going to be any action, if they were going to arrest Zeljan Kurst, this was the last place they would have wanted to do it.

In fact, Kurst was still unaware of his pursuers as he crossed the Great Court, a gleaming white space with a spectacular glass roof sweeping in a huge curve overhead. He skirted around the gift shops and information booths, making for the first galleries. As he went, he noticed a Japanese couple, tiny and almost identical, taking photographs of each other against a twisting staircase. A bearded student with a backpack stood next to the postcards, pulling them out one at a time and studying them as if trying to find hidden codes. Tap, tap, tap. The end of the walking stick beat out its rhythm as he continued on his way. He knew exactly where he was going and would arrive at the exact minute that had been agreed upon.

Zeljan Kurst was a large man with heavy, broad shoulders that formed a straight line on either side of an unnaturally thick neck. He was bald by choice.

His head had been shaved and there was a dark gray shadow beneath the skin. His eyes, a muddy brown, showed little intelligence, and he had the thick lips and small, squashed nose of a wrestler, or perhaps a bouncer at a shady nightclub. Many people had underestimated him and occasionally Kurst had found it necessary to correct them. This usually involved killing them. He walked past the statue of a naked, crouching goddess. An elderly woman with a deerstalker hat, sitting on a stool with brushes and oil paints, was making a bad copy of it on a large white canvas. Ahead of Kurst were two stone animals—strangely shaped lions—and to one side an entire temple, more than two thousand years old, brought from southwest Turkey and reconstructed piece by piece. He barely glanced at them. He didn't like museums, although his house was furnished with rare objects that had been stolen from several of them. But that was the point. Why should something that might be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars be left to molder in a dark room, stared at by idiot members of the general public who had little or no idea of its true value? Kurst had a simple rule of life. To enjoy something fully, you had to own it.

And if you couldn't buy it, then you would have to steal it.

Ahead of him, two modern glass doors led into a final gallery. He watched as a tall, well-built black man carrying a notebook and pen walked through, then went in himself. The gallery was huge, stretching out in both directions, like an airport runway. Although there were more than a hundred people there, it wasn't even half full. Everything was gray: the walls, the floor, the very air. But spotlights shining down from the ceiling, ten times higher than the visitors who stood beneath it, picked out the treasures that the room contained and these shone, soft and gold.

They ran along both walls, from one end to the other, a series of marble tablets with a crowd of figures that had been brought together to form a single line. They were men and women, ancient Greeks, some sitting, some standing, some talking, some riding on horseback. Some carried musical instruments, others bundles of linen or plates and glasses for a feast. Many of them were incomplete. Two and a half millennia had worn away their faces, broken off arms and legs. But there was something remarkable about the details that remained. It was easy to see that these had been real people, that they had once lived ordinary lives until they had been frozen in this waking dream, an entire world captured in stone.

Zeljan Kurst barely glanced at them. The gallery had two raised platforms, one at each end, reached by a short flight of steps or an elevator—which must have been used by the man he had come to see. He was on the far right, sitting on his own in a wheelchair, with a blanket over his knees. Kurst walked over to him.

“Mr. Kurst?” The voice was dry and strangled. It came from a lizard neck.

Kurst nodded. He was a careful man and had made it a rule never to speak unless there was a particular need.

“I am Ariston.”

“I know who you are.”

“Thank you for coming.”

Yannis Ariston Xenopolos was said to be worth about thirty-five billion dollars. He had made this money from a huge shipping empire, which he controlled from his offices in Athens. To this he had added an airline, Ariston Air, and a chain of hotels. And now he was dying. Kurst would have known even without reading stories in the newspapers. It was obvious from the sunken cheeks, the dreadful white of the man's skin, the way he sat like a hunched-up Egyptian mummy, his body disappearing into itself. But most of all it was in his eyes. Kurst had once been the head of the Yugoslav police force, and he had always been interested in the way the prisoners had looked at him just before he executed them. He could see the same thing right here. The Greek had accepted death. All hope had gone.

"I took a considerable risk coming here." Kurst spoke with a heavy Eastern European accent which somehow dragged his words down. "What is it you want?"

"I would have thought the answer would be obvious to you."

"The Elgin marbles . . ."

"Exactly. I wanted you to come here so that you would understand."

Ariston reached out with a hand that was more like a claw, gripping a lever on the arm of his wheelchair. The whole thing was battery operated, and with a soft whir, it spun him around so that he faced the room.

"This is one of the greatest pieces of art that the world has ever produced," he began. "Take a look at the figures, Mr. Kurst. They are so beautiful that it is almost impossible to find the words to describe them. They once decorated a temple in the heart of Athens—the Parthenon, dedicated to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. The frieze that you are examining depicts the summer festival that took place every year in honor of the goddess . . ."

Again the claw pressed down, turning him so that he faced a group of statues that stood inside the chamber, behind him. First there was a horse rising as if out of water, with only its head showing. Then came a naked man, lying on his back. Then three women, all missing their heads. From the way they were arranged, it was clear that these figures had once stood in the triangles at each end of the Parthenon.

"The horse belonged to Helios, the sun god," Ariston explained. "Next comes Dionysus, the god of wine. The figures to his right are the goddess Demeter and her daughter—"

"I am familiar with the Elgin marbles," Kurst interrupted. It didn't matter how much he had been paid. He hadn't come here for a lecture.

"Then you will also be aware that they were all plundered. Stolen! Two hundred years ago, a British aristocrat called Lord Elgin came to Athens. He tore them off the temple and transported them back to London. Since then my country has asked many times for them to be returned. We have even built a new museum in Athens to house them. They are the glory of Greece, Mr. Kurst. They are part of our heritage. They should come home."

The old man fumbled in his blanket and produced an oxygen mask, which he pressed against his face.

There was the hiss of compressed air and he sucked greedily. At last, he began again.

“But the British government has refused. They insist on keeping this stolen property. They will not listen to the voice of the Greek people. And so I have decided that, although it is the last thing I will do in my life, I will make them listen. That is why I have contacted you and your organization. I want you to steal the sculptures and return them to Greece.”

On the street outside, four more cars had pulled up next to the British Museum, spilling out fifteen more agents. That made twenty-three in total with the ones who had followed Kurst from City Airport. They were fairly confident that their man was still inside the building. But with ninety-four galleries covering a floor space of two and a half square miles, it was going to be almost impossible to find him. And already the order had gone out. Do not, under any circumstances, approach him while he is in a public area. This man is extremely dangerous. If he feels that he's trapped, there's no saying what he will do.

The result could be a bloodbath.

Zeljan Kurst was quite unaware of the approaching MI6 men as he considered what the Greek billionaire had just said.

“Stealing the Elgin marbles won't help you,” Kurst said. “The British government will simply demand them back. It would be better to threaten them. To blackmail them, perhaps.”

“Do whatever it takes. I don't care. You can kill half the population of this loathsome country if it will achieve what I want . . .” Ariston broke into a fit of coughing. Pearls of white saliva appeared at his lips.

Kurst waited for him to recover. Then he nodded slowly. “It can be done,” he said. “But it will take time. And it will be expensive.”

Ariston nodded. “This work is my legacy to the Greek people. If you will agree to do it for me, I will pay you five million dollars immediately with a further fifteen million when you succeed.”

“It's not enough,” Kurst said.

Ariston looked at him slyly. “There was a time when you might have said that and I would have been forced to agree,” he said. “But Scorpia is not what it was. There have been two failures in the space of a single year. The operation called Invisible Sword and, more recently, the business in northwest Australia.” He smiled, showing gray teeth. “The very fact that you are here today shows how weak you have become.”

“Scorpia has regrouped,” Kurst retorted. “We have taken on new recruits. I would say we are stronger than ever. We can choose our clients, Mr.

Xenopolos, and we do not negotiate.”

“Name your price.”

“Forty million.”

Ariston's eyes barely flickered. "Agreed."

"Half in advance."

"As you wish."

Kurst turned and walked away without saying another word, his cane beating the same rhythm on the floor. As he made his way back toward the entrance, his mind was already focused on the task that lay ahead. Although he would never have dreamed of saying as much, he was glad that he had come here today. It was actually very much his desire to take on the British government once again. The failures that Ariston had mentioned had both involved the British secret service.

It was fortunate that the old man hadn't heard the full story. Would he have still approached Scorpia if he had known the almost incredible truth? That both failures had involved the same fourteen-year-old boy?

In the end, it was just bad luck—bad timing—that he left when he did. He was about to reach the Great Court when one of the MI6 agents crossed in front of him and suddenly the two of them were face-to-face, only inches apart. The agent—his name was Travis—was new and inexperienced. He was unable to keep the shock out of his eyes, and at that moment Kurst knew that he had been recognized.

Travis had no choice. He had been given his orders, but he knew that if he obeyed them he would die. He fumbled in his jacket and pulled out his pistol, the 9mm Browning that has long been a favorite of the SAS. At the same time, he shouted, louder than he needed to, "Stay where you are! If you move, I will fire." It was exactly how he had been trained. He was both exerting his authority over his target and alerting any nearby agents that his cover had been blown.

Unfortunately, in the silence of the museum and with the ceiling so high overhead, his words echoed out. A few tourists turned to see what was happening. They caught sight of the gun. The first seeds of panic were planted and instantly began to grow.

Kurst raised his hands, one of them still holding the ebony walking stick. At the same time, he moved very slightly to one side. Travis followed him with his eyes and didn't see something flash through the air over Kurst's shoulder, didn't even notice it until it had buried itself in his throat. The old woman who had been painting the copy of the kneeling goddess had followed Kurst to the door. Underneath the makeup, she wasn't old at all, and her brushes might have had tufts at one end, but the handles were precision-made steel and razor sharp. Travis fell to his knees. In the last second of his life, his trigger finger tightened and the gun went off, the explosion amplified by the stone walls all around. That was when the panic began for real.

The tourists screamed and scattered, some of them diving into the shop or behind the information desks. A group of primary school students, who had just been visiting the Egyptian mummies, crouched down beside the stairs, cowering together. An American woman, standing by herself, began to scream. The British Museum guards, many of them old and long retired from their real careers, remained frozen to the spot, completely unprepared for an event like this. Meanwhile, Kurst stepped over the dead man and continued to move slowly toward the main door.

Of course he hadn't come to the museum alone. Scorpia would not have risked the freedom of its chi

executive, even for a million dollars, and its agents surrounded him on all sides. As the other MI6 agents closed in from every direction, still unsure what had happened but knowing that all the rules had changed, they were met by a hail of machine-gun fire. The bearded student who had been examining the postcards had reached into his backpack and drawn out a miniature machine gun with folding shoulder stock and was spraying the hall with bullets. An MI6 man, halfway down the west stairs, threw his arms back in surprise, then jerked forward and tumbled down. The American woman was screaming. The primary school children were crying in terror. All the alarms in the building had gone off. There were people running in every direction.

The Japanese man who had been photographing his wife threw his camera on the floor and it exploded with a soft *woomph*, releasing thick, dark green fumes into the air. In seconds, Kurst had disappeared. The Great Court had become a battle zone. Two MI6 men slid to a halt, trying to peer through the smoke. There was a loud crack, then another, and they fell to the ground. They had been shot in the leg by the Japanese woman, who had produced a pearl-handled Nambu pistol from her handbag.

Meanwhile, holding a handkerchief across his face, Kurst had reached the main doors. There had been little security when he came in. There was none as he left. Out of the corner of his eye he saw an MI6 agent try to rush him, then fall back as he was grabbed by his personal bodyguard, the black man with the notebook whom he had registered on his way to the Elgin marbles. The human neck makes an unmistakable sound when it is snapped, and he heard it now. The agent slumped to the ground. Kurst walked out into the fresh air.

There were people running between the pillars, tumbling down the steps, and hurling themselves across the open area in front of the building. Already the police were on their way, their sirens growing in volume as they came together from different parts of the city. Kurst's limousine was waiting for him at the gate. But there were two men moving purposefully toward him, both dressed in charcoal gray suits and sunglasses. He briefly wondered why people who worked in espionage had to make themselves look so obvious. They had become aware of the chaos inside the British Museum and were racing in.

Perhaps they hadn't expected him to emerge so quickly.

Kurst lifted his walking stick. It was in fact a hollowed-out tube with a single gas-fired bullet and an electric trigger concealed just beneath the handle.

The bullet had been specially modified. It wouldn't just kill a man. It would tear him in half.

He fired. The man on the left was blown off his feet, landing in a spinning, bloody ball. The second man froze for just one second. It was much too long.

Moving surprisingly fast for someone of his age, Kurst swung the walking stick through the air, using it like a sword. The metal casing slammed into the agent's throat and he crumpled instantly. Kurst lumbered toward the car. The passenger door was already open and he threw himself in, slamming it behind him. There was a series of gunshots. But the car windows were bulletproof and the bodywork was armor-plated. With a screech of tires, the limousine swung out. Another man stood in the way, his gun held commando-style in both hands. He fired once. The bullet slammed into the window right in front of Kurst's face, leaving a dent and a spider's web of cracks. The chauffeur accelerated. There was a thud as the man hit the fender and he was hurled out of the way.

Two hours later, a man in a blond wig, wearing sunglasses and holding a huge bunch of flowers, boarded the Eurostar train to Paris. Zeljan Kurst hated these disguises, but it was something else he had learned in his long career. If you're trying not to be seen, it often helps to make yourself as prominent as possible. The flowers and the wig were ridiculous, and although the police and MI6 were looking for him all over London, they certainly wouldn't associate them with him.

As he settled into his prebooked seat in first class and sipped his complimentary glass of champagne, Kurst's mind was focused on the problem he had been given. The shoot-out at the museum was already forgotten. The question was—who would be the best person to handle this quite interesting business of the Elgin marbles? There were now twelve members of Scorpia, including him, and he mentally went over them one by one.

Levi Krol, the former Israeli agent who, in a moment of carelessness, had shot out his own eye? Mikato, the Japanese policeman turned Yakuza gangster? Dr. Three? Or perhaps this might be an opportunity for their newest recruit. He had the sort of mind that would enjoy working out a problem of this complexity, along with the ruthlessness to see it through to the end.

There was a blast of a whistle and the train moved off. Kurst took out his mobile phone—encrypted, of course—and dialed a number. The train slid down the platform and picked up speed, and as they left King's Cross International, Kurst permitted himself the rare luxury of a smile. Yes. Razim was perfect. He would bring his unique talents to this new assignment. Kurst was sure of it. He had chosen exactly the right man.

2

THE MEASUREMENT OF PAIN

“THANK YOU. THANK YOU. Thank you, my dear Mr. Kurst. I will begin to consider the matter at once.”

The man with the silver hair flipped shut his mobile phone and slid it into the top pocket of his dishdasha—the long-sleeved white cotton dress worn by most Arab men. He stood for a moment, savoring the air. It was a cool night, but then of course this was only February. Two months from now and the temperature would rise into the eighties . . . considerably more during the day. He looked up at the stars. There were just a few of them tonight, but they shone with more intensity than any stars in the world. He never tired of their beauty, and of course, living here in the middle of the Sahara Desert in Egypt, there was no light pollution and he could see them more clearly than anywhere else.

The sun had set two hours ago, but there was still a deep, unearthly blue glow in the sky on the edge of the horizon. Looking out across the desert, he could just make out the pale gray of the salt lakes that were spread out all around. For this was the Siwa Oasis, 350 miles from Cairo, a place that owed its existence to the fluke of there being water in the desert, not just the salt lakes but freshwater wells and thermal springs, bubbling up from the bowels of the earth. Ten miles away, he could just make out the glimmering streetlights that signaled the town of Siwa. Apart from a few hotels, shops, and Internet cafés, there wasn't very much there, and the man visited the town as seldom as possible. Nobody from the town ever came here.

The man was standing on the parapet of a French fort, built at the end of the eighteenth century when

Napoleon had invaded Egypt. A few new buildings had been added more recently, and there were signs of further construction . . . scaffolding, construction equipment, and a great pile of salt that had been drawn from the lake and would be mixed with sand to make bricks.

There was something very strange about the compound, which stood on its own, perfectly square, surrounded by sand. It looked like something out of a Hollywood movie . . . or perhaps a mirage. First there was the outer wall, not high but several feet thick, with battlements all the way around and solid guard towers rising up much farther at each of the four corners. These were punctuated by narrow, slotlike windows, making it easy to look out but impossible to look in. The only way into the fort was through an arched gateway with an oak door—it was made of whole tree trunks bound with steel and would have taken several men to open if it hadn't been electrically operated.

Inside, the fort was like an army barracks with a dozen buildings neatly laid out around a central well. Water, of course, was everything in the desert. An army would be able to survive here for months—living, sleeping, exercising, and drilling on the parade ground, hardly aware of the world outside. There were two accommodation blocks—one for officers, one for common soldiers—a prison block, various storerooms, a bakery, and a chapel. All of these had been converted with air-conditioning, hot and cold running water, every modern comfort. The old stables had been turned into a recreation room with snooker tables and a cinema screen. The armory still contained weapons—though very different from the ones used by the forces of Napoleon.

These included flamethrowers, hand grenades, and even handheld rocket launchers . . . for the man who had privately purchased the fort and redesigned it needed to be safe, and beneath the sun-baked bricks, the dusty courtyard, and the ancient battlements lay some very sophisticated equipment indeed. Everything was powered by an electric generator housed in what had once been the forge. A radio mast and three satellite dishes rose above one of the towers. Television cameras watched for any movement. At night, infrared lights and radar scanned the area all around. All of these were wired into the control room, once the bakery, with a single chimney rising above a flat roof, leading up from what had once been the bread oven. The control room was manned twenty-four hours a day, and nobody could enter or leave without authorization—the main gate could be opened only from inside. He was in constant radio communication with the guards on patrol. These were local men, dressed in Bedouin style, with headaddresses, loose-fitting robes, sandals, and knives at their belts. They also had machine guns slung over their shoulders.

The man's name was Abdul-Aziz Al-Rahim, but that wasn't what he called himself now. As an internationally wanted terrorist and convicted war criminal, it was better not to have any name at all. In the end, he had jumbled up letters from his name and come up with Razim—which was how he was known to his friends in Scorpiia. And in truth, he had no other friends. He was unmarried. Sometimes he would spend a whole month without speaking to anyone at all. But Razim didn't mind. In fact, he preferred it that way.

Razim was not an Egyptian. He had been born forty-five years ago in the town of Tikrit, in Iraq. His father was a university professor. His mother had studied Arabic literature at the University of Cambridge and had herself become a well-known writer and poet. Abdul-Aziz (the name means "servant of the powerful" in Arabic) was one of two children—he had an older sister named Rima. The family lived together in one of the oldest houses of the city, a narrow, white brick building constructed around a central courtyard packed with flowers and plants and with a fountain playing in the middle.

From the very start, Razim was a difficult child. His father used to joke that he had been born in a sandstorm and that some of the sand must have gotten into his blood. As a baby, he never smiled or gurgled but lay sulenly in his cot as if wondering how he had got there and how, perhaps, he might escape. As soon as he learned to walk, he tried to run away. Nannies never stayed long in the household. Razim's temper tantrums drove three of them away. The fourth left with a pair of nail scissors driven into her thigh after she had told him off for teasing his sister.

At least he did well at school . . . indeed, his teachers thought that he was a genius. He came top in every subject and by the age of twelve was almost fluent in three languages. It was hardly surprising that he didn't get along with the other children. Even then Razim had no friends, but he preferred it that way. He was a quiet, solitary boy, and he had already come to realize that there was something different about him, even though he wasn't quite sure what it was. Eventually, though, after considerable thought, he managed to work it out. He had no emotions. Nothing scared him or upset him. Nothing made him particularly happy either. There was no food that he particularly enjoyed. It was as if the whole of life had been put under a laboratory slide and he was the scientist examining it. Every day for him was the same. He didn't feel anything.

He decided to put this to the test. His parents had bought him a pet, a scruffy mongrel, when he was small and it had always been his companion. So one day he took it down to the orchard behind his parents' house and strangled it, just to see how he felt. It didn't bother him at all. His mother and father wondered about the missing dog, and they also noticed the scratches on Razim's hands and arms, but they accepted his explanation that he had brushed against a barbed-wire fence. They were both intelligent people, but no parent wants to think the worst of their child, and the truth was that Razim was still doing brilliantly at school. He ate his meals with them and came with them to the mosque for family prayers. He clearly didn't like his sister but he was polite to her. What more could they ask?

In 1979, the history of Iraq changed when Saddam Hussein came to power. One of his first acts as president was to arrest sixty-eight members of his party and accuse them of treason. Twenty-two of them were executed. The other forty-six were forced to make up the firing squads. When Razim heard about this little twist of cruelty, he realized that his country had been taken over by a man who was very close to his own heart. He began to think how he might get to meet him. Could he find a way into the corridors of power?

As it happened, the opportunity arose very quickly. It was obvious to many people in Iraq that Saddam was brutal, mad, and dangerous, and in the late summer of that same year, Razim's parents held a secret meeting in their house with other academics, writers, and well-placed friends to discuss how they might get rid of him. How were they to know that Razim was recording the entire conversation on a tape recorder that they had given him for his fourteenth birthday? The next day, he skipped school and went instead to the local police, taking the evidence with him.

Revenge came like a desert storm. Razim's parents were arrested and shot without even the benefit of a trial. Razim never found out what happened to his seventeen-year-old sister—nor did he care. The last he saw of her, she was being dragged screaming from the house by four laughing policemen who threw her into the back of a van. Everyone who had attended the meeting was arrested. None of them was ever seen again.

As a reward for his loyalty, the local chief of police invited Razim—who was of course an orphan now

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