

THE
KINGDOM
OF ASSASSINS

*Political perception is not political reality.
Your perception is your enemy's deception.*

ERIK
MACKENZIE

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Thank you.

FOR MY PARENTS



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C H A P T E R 1

SANDS OF THE PROPHET

*I am the scourge of God chosen
To Chastise you, since no one knows the remedy of your sin
Iniquity except me. You are wicked but I am more wicked
Than you, so be silent.*

—TAMBURLAINE THE GREAT, 1398

Saudi Arabia—Ten Years from Now . . .

ŠAHRĀZĀD TRAVERSED THE burning sands of the Prophet on a black Arabian stallion. Muscles working like pistons, the horse carried its royal owner up and down the shifting dunes of the land the Saudis called The Kingdom. With each step, the stallion's hooves sank into the dunes, and wind erased the tracks behind.

Golden sand whispered over the landscape, stinging the princess's skin. The grains themselves were like sugar or salt, dry and perfect. Here in the desert, it was not acts of man that shaped the world, but wind and sand alone. Both spoke to Šahrāzād now: *You have no choice. You cannot go back.* In addition to being the daughter of Saudi Arabia's king, Šahrāzād was also the chief financial officer of Amarco—The Kingdom's state-owned oil company and the wealthiest corporation in the world. Despite her Harvard education, she was poorly prepared for what lay ahead.

It had been more than ten years since the Arab Spring, yet no spring had come to The Kingdom. That would soon change, she knew. Whether the change would lead to Renaissance or Dark Age, none could say. She endeavored to be a spark for political change. Having no desire to be trapped by fate like everyone else, she longed for something more. She wished to be molded not by culture, but by the force of her own will.

The wind dusted sand across the veil covering Šahrāzād's face and hair. Looking up, she could see her falcon circling in the clear blue sky above. Aside from horse and falcon, she was alone in the desert. She looked at her watch, a gift from her father. Micro-inscribed on the back was a reminder: "Time is all we have, the past is a memory and the future is ours to dream, yet the present slips past us."

She thought about her father's voice, and how it always tasted like liquid gold and honey. For as long as she could remember, she'd been able to taste sounds. *Synesthesia*, they called it. The peculiar gift, considered a useless curiosity by science, conveyed things to her that others could not

perceive: whether a person who spoke was truthful or lying, arrogant or humble. The ability colored her perceptions and her memories.

She gazed up as the saker falcon glided to her, flaring its wings and wrapping its black razor talons around her leather gauntlet. The bird looked at her and blinked, then let out a screeching call that tasted metallic. After a moment, the falcon left her arm and returned to the sky.

Seeing movement in the distance, Šahrāzād lifted her veil. She fished out the grain of sand which immediately lodged in one eye, and squinted through the shimmering blur of a heat-mirage. After a moment, a shape emerged: a man on horseback, descending a large sand dune. He vanished behind a second dune. Šahrāzād was beginning to think she'd imagined him when he reappeared a moment later. He was her CIA contact, and the reason for her presence here. She pulled her veil back into place and tapped the pocket holding the encrypted memory card. The card held evidence on the missing money from Amaro: hundreds of millions in U.S. dollars.

As the man drew nearer, she saw his face: eyes of stone set in iron cheeks. He rode a strong black stallion. “*As-salaamu aleikum*,” he said. Peace be upon you. He spoke perfect Saudi Arabic, but his voice tasted like poison.

“*Wa aleikum salaam*,” Šahrāzād replied. Unto you be peace.

The stranger pulled his horse alongside hers. “You have the item,” he said with a too-wide smile. The muscle below his left eyelid vibrated.

Šahrāzād’s skin turned cold. “What item?” she asked.

“The disk.”

“I’m hunting with my falcon.”

A muscle on the stranger’s face twitched, and his jaw tightened. “And I am the sword of the Redeemer,” he said.

Šahrāzād felt fear ripple through her, but contained it.

The man drew a curved knife and lurched at her. She tried to back up, but her horse spooked and threw her. She landed on her face, momentarily stunned. She felt her teeth dig into her lips, tasting blood mixed with sand.

Her attacker leaped from his horse and came at her, slashing with the blade. Šahrāzād rolled onto her back, the white heat of adrenaline pulsing through her like electricity. She drew her legs up to her chest, as if curling up in defeat—then snapped both feet into her assailant’s face, doing her best to break his neck. The man staggered back a step, spitting teeth, then surged forward.

Šahrāzād drew a small Glock pistol from her waistband and fired twice. The first bullet hit him in the left eye, the second in the forehead. She rolled aside as he fell, his life leaking into the sand. She gazed at the stranger. She hated killing, but he’d left her little choice. She felt guilt in the act, but not in his death. She pushed those thoughts aside and continued with the task at hand. She took a moment to soothe the horses after the gunshots, then knelt to search the man’s body. “*uTlubuu al-’ilm min al-mahd ’ilaa allaHd,*” she said to herself. Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. She found a cell phone, some matches, and a small camouflage-pattern Wenger Swiss Army knife.

She removed the phone’s battery so she couldn’t be tracked, and pocketed her finds. The man carried no ID, and no tattoos

were evident. She snapped photos of his face with her camera. It was then that she noticed the blood on her hands, already drying in the desert heat. She poured water from a small bottle and rubbed her hands together. The blood turned rust-brown. She tried rubbing her hands harder, but the blood worked its way into the swirls of her fingerprints and the fresh crack in her watch crystal. The dead man's open eye was drying out in the merciless 120-degree heat.

Šahrāzād calmed herself, feeling a strange unity with the desert. She gazed up at the falcon as it circled above, a natural hunter. Someone knew. It could only be the Americans, or someone in The Kingdom. Either way, that meant they had to kill her. Despite the situation, she smiled. What was it the Americans said? *Strike one.*

In the distance, a tsunami of sand filled half the sky: a sandstorm, coming her way like an angry *djinn*. Such events could be beautiful—the way the airborne sand filtered the light—and Šahrāzād had always admired them. From a distance—which was where she intended to keep this one.

It was an eight-hour ride back to camp. In a world that tore time apart and shrank the space between all people, there was something refreshing about the solitude. Tethering the second horse to her own, she mounted up and headed back. The falcon followed, screeching to the heavens.



CHAPTER 2

HARBINGER

*If history were taught in the form of stories,
it would never be forgotten.*

—RUDYARD KIPLING

THE MOUNTAINOUS TERRAIN of Afghanistan was like a Martian landscape, pocked with craters from artillery shells. Mike “Mac” Maclaymore’s ears rang with a pain that shouted into his bones as heavy machinegun fire sounded close by.

More shots rang out, and a phone rang—Mike woke up on the floor beside the bed in his New York apartment. He got up carefully, a habit he’d developed while sleeping in the deserts of the Middle East and Afghanistan where scorpions sometimes crawled into sleeping bags. He’d remember that hot sting forever.

He groped in the darkness, missing the phone. He squinted at the clock, which glowed against a negative-image skyline:

dark buildings specked with lighted windows, set against a black sky. The clock's green diodes read 2:30 a.m., and the phone's third ring told him he wasn't going back to sleep without answering. He picked up.

"Mac?" said the voice on the phone.

Mike recognized the rugged voice of the man who'd raised him, Aleister Maclaymore, his uncle and the department's counterterrorism chief. "Yeah," Mike answered, still barely awake.

"The intel is good. The raid's a go for five a.m."

"We got the warrants?"

"No-knock night warrants," Chief Maclaymore replied.

Mike supposed that was good news. "We need them alive," he said, still groggy. "Have to find out why they're here."

"From the intel, an attack by Tamerlaine is going to happen soon," Chief Maclaymore told him.

"We need details," Mike said. "Where. When. What. In case they have a backup cell."

"Agreed."

"I'm being transferred to Intel tomorrow," Mike said. He looked at the clock again.

"Today, actually."

"This is your case, you should see it through. You almost caught Tamerlaine many years ago, that makes you the best man for this. I can hold up the transfer, but not for long. And you or Eva will have to leave the unit in a week, regs say no married couples working together."

"We're getting divorced."

“Until that day, you’re married. Them’s the rules. Take it up with the brass.”

“You’re the brass.”

“I know you’re bitter about the Internal Affairs investigation,” Aleister told him, “but it’s over. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Ten-four.” Mike hung up. He paused for a moment, thinking of the anonymous tipster’s voice telling him an attack was going to happen soon. He thought back over the hours of gumshoe work, the wiretaps, the warrants and stakeouts. The tip had led to something so big, it was like a lottery ticket—one that could save lives.

Mike thought about his future. He had a few choices ahead of him. He’d made a million mistakes in his life, lived wrongly in many different ways and made too many unnecessary sacrifices. A gold cross hung from his neck, a Christmas gift from his son Chris. He gazed at it for a moment, then tucked it back under his shirt. In the living room there was an old photograph of Chris at eight, pressing his young face against a cold glass window as he finished drawing *I love you* on the frost-covered glass. He took a photograph of it with his cell phone. Other memories rippled through him, triggering a cascade of images in his mind’s eye. He pressed the image on his cell screen, and a video played: his son on a bicycle, Mike letting go as Chris rode without training wheels for the first time. “Daddy, look at me!”

He played another video, of Chris doing push-ups. “Put your hands in front of you, feet back, legs back, butt up, and go up and down,” Mike said on the screen.

“Like this?” Chris did a pushup.

“Great!”

Another video showed Chris doing somersaults and martial arts hip throws and counting in Japanese. Yet another showed the two of them in Colorado, atop a hill surrounded by mountains. A black-and-red bat kite rode the air above them, set loose when a sudden gust of wind snapped the kite-string. “Daddy, Batty escaped.” The video clip ended with Chris watching the kite fly off on its own. The image of his son looking up at the bright blue sky was seared into his memory, like a message chiseled in stone. His memories were like stars fading as the sun rises in the morning. He didn’t want the sun to rise, he just wanted to see the stars in the sky.

Mike pushed the thoughts of his son from his mind; the memories were just too painful. He stared at the ceiling for a while and thought about not getting up. He didn’t want to live like this anymore. Then he forced himself out of bed. His joints cracked and his body ached, making him feel older than his years. Short nights didn’t used to feel so hard.

He looked at the half-completed, thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle on his kitchen table. When finished, it would depict *Alice in Wonderland’s* Red Queen and the Queen of Hearts facing each other. Beside the puzzle were two photographs of his mother: one taken in Red Square, the other at Checkpoint Charlie. Near the table was his painter’s easel, with an unfinished scene of a city park, half-sketched and half-painted, as if he’d been exploring without being quite sure of his destination.

He made his way to the refrigerator, which was covered with various news clippings: Former soldier now NYC Cop stops \$100 million dollar heroin trafficking deal; Cop’s son missing; Cop’s mother killed by Russian Military Intelligence

Officer and Mobster “Vronsky”; Cop’s son killed by assassin, from Kish Iran, others still at large. He reminded himself of the past every day. He didn’t want to lose himself in the present, like everyone else; it kept him grounded but in a distorted way. How one’s past caught up with them. His time in Afghanistan as a Special Forces soldier seared into his soul and recently, his undercover investigation to stop a massive heroin deal, that brought him the deaths of his own mother and son. The sacrifices were too great to be worth doing good anymore.

He glanced at the dirty dishes in the sink and opened the freezer, which was stacked high with breakfast burritos. He popped one in the microwave and gazed at the wedding band in Eva’s ashtray—his father’s wedding band, given to Mike by his mother. Eva had his mother’s ring; it was only natural for both rings to stay together. He remembered the rings meant a lot to him. His father had died while his mother escaped East Berlin during the Cold War, so that Mike could be born in freedom. He had an old photo of his parents, taken in East Berlin, and a more recent photo taken before she died.

He looked at a picture of Eva and himself together, taken atop Mount Everest. “We’re just two snowflakes on a mountain-top, yet we are both on top of the world,” she told him when they reached the summit. Taking in the remains of the past, his mind roamed. Should I have faith? Should I have doubt? What I desire, my grail, is the past, but it’s only a memory. I want my future to be like the past, even if only a sliver of what once was. “Ten years,” he said aloud, gazing at the ring.

His apartment was too big for one person now, too empty. People would kill for an apartment like this in the city, but he didn't care anymore. He just wanted Eva back. He toyed with the ring while the burrito cooked, eventually slipping it on his finger. When the microwave dinged, he slid the ring back off and put it in his wallet.

Moving to the bathroom, he splashed cold water on his face, towed off and regarded the soon-to-be-divorced man in the mirror. Arctic gray eyes stared back at him, rimmed by little red veins. Small white strands had somehow appeared in his dark hair, and when he stretched, his joints made popping sounds. His youth had slipped away. And while a large part of him didn't want to do this anymore, another part of him wanted to see it through—and he wouldn't go back on his word. He was half realist and half idealist. The things that made him go forward were the things he cared about: his honor, his word. And yet he hated both. The world was a dungeon, and he needed to escape it. He trudged back to the kitchen, taking his toothbrush with him so he wouldn't have to repeat the trip.

Colorful fish darted through a tank in the living room, just below a shelf filled with football, wrestling, and martial arts trophies. A few hundred painted tin figurines of soldiers from different historical periods lined the other shelves, and his father's two 16th-Century Samurai swords—the daishō: two swords, katana and wakizashi—hung on the wall.

A couch faced the TV. On the wall above it was a replica of the Shield of Achilles; according to Greek mythology, the original was forged by Hephaestus, god of fire. The gold and

silver shield was decorated with highly detailed etchings of two Greek cities: one at peace, the other ruined by war. Mike looked at it every day. On the opposite wall was an American flag, given to him by the U.S. State Department on the death of his father. Below it was a silver Gurkha knife, a gift from Aleister, celebrating Mike and Eva's climb to the top of Mount Everest.

Scooping up a prescription bottle, he popped a few blood pressure pills before retrieving his burrito. If he could find his pants, inhaler, keys with Cheshire Cat thumb drive and a clean shirt, he'd be good to go.

Two hours later, in the pitch black of early morning, stars scudded across a cloudless sky. The temperature was brisk enough for a fleece pullover. Mike shared the back of the counter-terrorism van with three other cops, the hum of surveillance equipment, and the smell of old coffee and burnt, stubbed-out cigarettes. For the past half hour, they'd been parked on a side street in the East Village, staring at live video of an apartment building a block away.

Mike's wife, Captain Eva Maclaymore, sat in one of the oversized van's two swivel chairs, listening to a headset. She wore slick yet feminine business attire. Mike found himself staring at the band of light-colored skin where her wedding ring used to be. He hadn't seen her in weeks. She was still gorgeous; her bronze Venezuelan skin, thick chestnut hair and emerald-green Irish eyes made for the perfect mix of all-American girl and exotic Latina.

They'd met on the job, which was odd because both of them normally avoided relationships with co-workers. The

job itself was hard enough; no one wanted to bring it home. Beyond the initial physical attraction, Mike had felt an instant connection to someone fiercely independent, yet intellectually and emotionally flexible. Their different tours of duty had made things difficult at first. They got together whenever they could, for four hours or thirty minutes or even five, treasuring each shared moment. Looking at her now, sorting through more than a decade of memories, he had to remind himself they were about to get divorced.

Eva's grandfather had been FBI. Her great grandfather had come off the boat from Scotland, while her mother's ancestors had migrated from Spain to Venezuela, and eventually to the U.S. Some of Eva's relatives had been killed by the flamboyant dictator Hugo Chavez, for the crime of speaking out against "*El Presidente*." Distrust of authority was in her genes.

Eva rose from the chair and came to Mike, nodding toward the door. They stepped outside. "Do you miss me?" she asked in a smoker's voice tinged by hard liquor.

Mike didn't answer.

"Been a long time," she added.

"For you or me?" Mike asked.

"I think you. You look like shit. How's your therapy?"

"Finished." Mike was relaxed but tired; nothing could rattle him.

"What are you, some type of Buddhist?" Eva asked.

"That's a compliment."

"I love your comebacks."

"Everyone's an asshole on this job," Mike told her. "It's a defense mechanism."

Eva nodded her agreement. “What do you want?”

“I want to move forward.”

“But you haven’t, have you?” She looked at him, first with anger, then a smile. She saw another supervisor waving her over. “I’ll be right back,” she said, and walked away.

Mike reviewed the interaction like rewinding a video, thinking how he felt and what he could have said, and fearing that the chasm between them was too great—that no combination of words could paint an accurate picture of the emotions swirling through the vast ocean of his soul. And yet the words he’d said in the past were like gold coins thrown into the sea—little pieces of treasure.

Mike waved as he spotted Chief Maclaymore, walking toward the van in a suit. He moved with a subtle trademark limp, remnant of a heroic gun battle waged decades before, in the first Iraq war. The older man carried himself like the last of the hard line of men who’d defended America in the blackest hours of World War Two. It was the little things about the job that had kept the older man at it for so many years. Aleister was the opposite of everything the department had largely become, and was rarely involved in the petty internecine politics of One Police Plaza. In a world of paper tigers, he was among the last remaining lions.

“Hello,” Mike said. The two of them man-hugged and entered the van.

“I knew you’d stay, Mac,” Aleister told him, taking one of the chairs and lighting up a Don Pepin Garcia cigar. Once in place, it seemed to grow from the space between his steel-gray beard and moustache, as if it had always been there. The tip

glowed orange for a moment, fading when Aleister exhaled. At least he didn't smoke the cheap ones.

Mike unclipped the tarnished, battered detective's shield from his belt. He'd been meaning to have it re-dipped to make it gold again, but kept putting it off. Clipping the badge to a shield holder, he hung it from his neck. There would soon be a large number of heavily armed cops running around, and he had no desire to be shot by accident.

Eva walked back into the van. "ESU is ready," she said into the radio.

Mike had seen the department's Emergency Services Unit, or SWAT team, in action before. Every time, he'd remember when he did operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

"Stand by," Eva said into the radio.

Mike gripped the door handle. "I'll be back," he said. He pushed the van door open and jumped to the ground. The block was a small cluster of brownstones and squat old condos, surrounded by towering skyscrapers. A nearly full moon cast a ghostly light over the scene. He turned the corner to get a good look at the building about to be invaded.

Seconds later, he heard Eva's voice on the radio, "Go! Go! Go!" Five ESU vans converged from both sides of the block, spilling dozens of black-clad tactical officers in body armor, balaclava masks and Kevlar helmets. Armed with M4 assault rifles, they stormed the steps of the target building and smashed in the door, flooding inside.

Outside, the street seemed deserted. Mike crouched between parked cars; they had a better chance of stopping stray bullets than he did. After a moment's delay, flash-bangs and tear-gas

grenades went off inside the building. Car alarms howled in protest as shattered window glass rained down like a hailstorm. The sound of pistols and submachine gun fire followed.

Something caught Mike's eye in the building across the street: a muzzle flash in a dark window. Someone on an upper floor was shooting into the raid site.

A voice yelled over Mike's radio. "10-13! Cop shot!"

"Sniper across the street!" Mike answered. "Third floor! I'm going in the front!" Memories of war flooded into his mind, but he pushed them back out just as fast. He put a bullet through the sniper's window and ran toward the building, wondering why it hadn't been cleared and secured before the raid. Or perhaps it had been, and someone had slipped in anyway.

Rushing inside, Mike found himself in a vestibule area, with three hallways leading off in different directions. It was eerie-quiet. He looked up the stairs, but saw nothing. Adrenaline welled up inside him, and his stomach twisted in pain.

He punched his weapon out before him and circled the base of the stairs. He saw the answer to his earlier question: two cops lay unconscious at the base of the stairwell, alive but cuffed and gagged.

At the end of a long hallway leading to one side of the building, an exit door was cracked open. Mike hurried down the hall and peered outside. Twenty yards off, a dark form fled down the garbage-strewn alley. But was he the sniper, or a bystander fleeing the gunfight?

Sudden footsteps sounded on the stairs behind him. Mike spun around and got a quick glance at a man with a rifle,

jumping off the stairs and running down another hall, one that led to the back of the building. Mike rushed to follow, radio at his lips. “Perp in sight! Male, six feet! Foot pursuit behind the building!”

Reaching the end of the hall, Mike looked outside. “Running southbound!” he said into the radio. Judging by the distance the suspect had already covered, Mike doubted he could catch him. He broke into a sprint anyway.

The world narrowed around him as his eyes focused on the sprinting figure ahead. It was not reality, but a sort of hyper-reality, almost drug-induced, or pornographic reality. He pushed himself to move faster, using his mind to overcome the lactic acid burn while trying not to trip. His quarry made a quick right. Mike stopped at the corner and peered around it at the same time the sniper looked back. The rifle started to swing his way. Mike ducked back as bullets shrieked past him, tearing chunks from the brickwork corner.

Mike looked again, just in time to see the sniper hang a left. Mike ran to the next corner, lungs and thighs on fire. When he peered around this time, the sniper was waiting for him. He felt the bullet rip his ear and tear through his hair.

Mike ducked back, peeled off his jacket and threw it past the corner at head-height. While the sniper wasted a second shooting at the jacket, Mike leaned out near the ground and fired empty.

The sniper dropped. Mike reloaded and stepped into the alley, keeping his weapon aimed at the now-still figure as he moved toward it. He couldn’t help thinking that violence seemed to follow him, a flood waiting to happen, held back

by the crumbling dam of civilization. Fate and choice brought different men to the same destination.

Reaching the sniper, he stepped on the man's H&K rifle and slid it away. Blood pooled around the dead man's head, rendered black by moonlight.

"Perp down," Mike said into the radio, and holstered his gun. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The smell of fired shots assailed him. His eyes snapped open and he stared at his hands, squeezing them into fists. The deep breaths weren't helping, so he took a hit from his inhaler.

Police helicopters roared overhead, jolting him back to the moment as their searchlights swept the alley. Remembering his jacket, he picked it up and put it back on. Cold air seeped through the bullet holes. Gazing down, he saw that his gold cross necklace had become tangled with his badge. He tucked it back under his shirt. Looking around, he saw two plastic recycling bins, an old shopping cart with its wheels torn off, and dozens of old coffee cans filled with rusted bolts and nails. What a place to die. And it had almost been him tonight.

He played the scene over in his mind: the chase, the shooting. He hadn't even seen the man's face, just a shadow in the alley. He wondered how many would grieve his own passing, when it came. Friends and family, of course. Fellow cops, in their own way. And that was it. To everyone else—to society—he was just another uniform, another number. He felt his asthma acting up, and took a hit from his inhaler. War is a lottery of death, not survival of the fittest, but survival of the lucky.

Suddenly ESS cops and fellow detectives were hustling his way and gathering around, saying things he didn't quite

hear until Eva pushed through them, and her voice seemed the only thing in the world—a beacon he could focus on. She was backlit like an angel, by the halogen flashlights of the cops behind her. “Are you all right?” she asked, hand brushing his arm. He could see her holding back; she wanted to say and do more, but didn’t. Part of it was her job; another part, perhaps something more.

He wanted to pull her close, kiss her, taste her and run his hands through her hair. He wasn’t sure that was still appropriate. In fact, he knew it wasn’t, so he just stood there feeling awkward. He managed a nod instead.

She leaned in and touched him on the shoulder and gave him a quick peck on his cheek. She still smelled and tasted like sin. “Should have been a fireman,” he said, finding his voice. “Any cops dead?”

“Two look critical,” she answered. “Would have been more without you.” Her face suddenly went pale. “Oh my God,” she said, and raised a hand to his head. It came away bloody.

“It’s just my ear.” He’d actually forgotten about it. He felt the ripped flesh with his fingers.

Eva took him by the arm. “Come on, let’s get you checked out.”

“I can live without an ear, can’t I? Worked for Van Gogh.”

“And look how he wound up,” Eva replied.

They made their way back to the van. As they approached, Mike’s boss and sometime partner Sergeant Jack Arnold—who always showed up late to everything—approached and shook hands. “You did great today. We live in a dog-eat-dog world, and you had your day.”

“Thanks,” Mike said. Somehow Jack had managed to find a sharp gray suit to wear, and one of his many gold watches. Mike suspected he kept a suit in his trunk.

Jack adjusted the Rolex on his wrist. “No—thank you,” Jack said. “Fuck the PC crowd and fuck this fucking cesspool scumbag city. You’re what this country needs.” Mike felt a quick pat on the back, and Jack was gone as swiftly as he’d come.

“What did we get in the raid?” he asked Eva.

“Very little.”