

Normal

Chapter One

Shihab Asad has never drawn a normal breath. From the moment I first saw him sauntering down a narrow alley towards me outside the Gaza bazaar. It was quite obvious that here was an extraordinary creature. We were both only eleven years old at the time and had no knowledge of each other until that moment. We might not, still, except for my eternal clumsiness. On seeing Asad walking down the alley toward me, I was perhaps instantly jealous of that lanky frame, carrying his beautiful face in such an easy, cocksure manner. I realize that now, but at the time I would never have admitted that such a distraction could have caused me to walk straight into a wooden post supporting a street awning. I hit it with such force that I backed up, dazed. Blind with pain, I continued stumbling backwards into a basket of overripe fruit placed casually in the vendor's stall behind me.

I looked up to see Shihab Asad, standing over me laughing, his head thrown back, his hands on his hips, his glorious black curls streaked by sunlight. A passerby might have thought him most cruel, but he reached down a hand to me and lifted me from my predicament with such good nature that it instantly warmed my heart. I hardly noticed my pain nor the stall owner in his checked turban admonishing me loudly to the crowd and Allah.

"Thank you" I mumbled, my head down in shame.

"Oh, no matter!" he laughed; his piercing eyes looking straight at me. "I have never seen such a wonderful fall. You must have practiced very hard." We both started to laugh and then we began to pick up the spilled fruit, putting it back into the basket. We laughed again, mumbling our own insults under our breath as we worked; the stall owner cursed us without pause.

When we finished, Asad turned to me and cocked his head as if observing some oddity, "Hey, my new friend, come and play football tomorrow at my house. My friends and I always have a great game on Thursday. You can practice your falls." He laughed at his own joke with such a pleasant tenor that I joined in myself.

As he told me the directions to his house, I could only nod in gratitude, star-struck by my new friend. If I had known at that moment that this charismatic boy would create a nation, it wouldn't have surprised me one whit. I watched Asad as he sauntered out of sight. I soon learned he always walked in that luxuriously confident style as naturally as he laughed in delight at the world. I wasted a significant part of my youth trying to imitate that walk. It was like trying to learn to play music by ear and just as impossible if not born with it.

All that day I planned for the next; kicking my football, practicing so I would be good enough for Asad and his friends. I was a very average athlete, and thought I was even worse than I was. My lack of self-confidence stretched to all areas except reading.

I knew I excelled there, reading voraciously every book I could find at levels far beyond my age. My English was excellent and I had started studying Chinese. I loved playing with Kanzi characters. My range of interests were so broad, it was hard to tie myself down. On this day, however, there was only one thing on my mind. Asad's football game.

I prepared for that day at Asad's house as if I were preparing for exams which would decide the rest of my life. In fact, such was the case, as it turned out.

Ammar's mind snapped back to the present. He needed to complete his letter to the President of United Arabia, Pepe. He pulled his light screen from his pocket. It expanded in his hand and hardened, with the half-completed letter crystallizing on the surface of the screen.

Ammar stepped off the elevator with a scowl on his face that his secretary and subordinates could not miss. He walked by them without his usual cheery greeting into a spare, though well-appointed, office with a huge wall of glass overlooking Port Beshera's busy harbor more than 80 floors below. As he passed even his secretary without acknowledgment, a sort of shudder passed through the office. The door to his office closed behind him and after a collective shrug everyone went back to work.

Ammar walked over and stood in front of the fourteen-foot-high sheet of glass that composed one entire wall of his office. Even in his funk, Ammar, as always, appreciated the spectacular view of the harbor. The fascinatingly busy waterway was stretched out below him full, as usual, with freighters, cargo ships, jet boats, and yachts all in a dance that, magically, resulted in no collisions. There were some unexplained graceful, fabric aircraft swooping here and there. A helicopter flashed by and jets rose every few minutes into the sky from Shihab Asad International Aeroport adding just the right excess of drama and chaos to the scene. A backdrop of towers, incredible in their gracefully delicate design surrounded the whole dazzling production, some rooted in the placid water of the harbor by slender columns of steel or massive pedestals of shimmering limestone. One could almost believe that this was the center of the world or maybe some alien world, so surreal was the view of the harbour and towers that seemingly rose directly from the frothing waters into the sky. Nothing but the water spoke to the sense of the natural; everything else was man-made. In fact, as Ammar knew, the area where he looked had been nothing but sea and a desolate polluted shore only two decades before. The towers were dappled in lush green vegetation, resting on man-made islands that either overlapped or were attached to the coast by bridges interspersed by beaches. The scene morphed a virtual world in a place where land did not really exist and the seas were a manipulated backdrop. Yet, it was real.

Ah well, it was a great accomplishment, but today he could not bask in its surreal beauty. Today, his most precious project would either fail or begin a tortuous journey to success. Now that one of the crowning achievements was in his sights, Ammar remembered that he had arisen slowly that morning, as he had on most mornings of his seventy-three years. For all his boundless energy, he was a 'slow starter. Even so, on this morning it was odd because this was one of the most important mornings of his life. Earlier, his beloved wife, Esther, had long since been up and he could smell coffee brewing in the kitchen. As he assembled himself in his morning ritual of shaving, showering, toothbrushing and dressing, his thoughts never left the reason for his ritual

and that of a thousand other members of his team in their own homes on this fateful morning.

Ammar turned toward his guest and asked her to be seated. In contrast to the modern background, the furniture was of traditional Islamic design. The woman who approached and set before his desk was in ultra-chic full body clothing, her head, but not her face, covered.

"Thank you for honoring my request to meet with you."

"Dear Naomi, I am honored that you are here."

"Are you aware of why I asked to see you?"

"I am, and, I must say, this movie you want to make seems like it could be a wonderful balm for all of us.

"May I?" asked Naomi using a hand gesture familiar in the modern age.

"Of course," Ammar answered.

Naomi pointed to an exterior glass wall which transitioned to a screen showing a giant manuscript and several movie trailers running silently at the same time.

"Well, the history of the Islamic woman has not been well told nor has the telling been factually accurate. As you know, the historical films show nothing but struggle, unfulfilled hopes and death. In my studies, history includes just as much joy and accomplishment as that of any culture. We want to give that side of history to Islamic viewers, but just as importantly to non-Islamic viewers."

"Will you be portraying true events or making up stories?"

"A combination, of course; we will not distort the facts, if that is what you mean, that is the opposite of our mission."

"Well, I have read most of the transcript and I do believe there might be a market for this. I have decided to fund your venture to the halfway point and then re-evaluate when I see the product."

"Thank you, sir," she said smiling slightly, "but movies don't really come together before the end."

"Is that written in the Koran or the Bible?"

"I do not remember movies being a great topic in either manuscript," her smile broadening.

"Well, that is my offer. I'll be fair with my analysis of half a film as I do want a success. Let's enjoy this fine afternoon and have lunch."

They walked out of the office into a hallway that was wide and filled with natural light. An elevator with a single door opened without any action on their part. The man says, 'ground floor' and a female voice says, "would you like a weather report Mr. Hussein?"

"No," says Ammar. They arrive in the lobby 5 seconds later. They exit the elevator into a gorgeous plant-filled lobby and pass to the street through an opening with no visible doors. They cross the busy street full of bicycles, scooters, cars, and a camel-drawn tourist wagon. On the opposite side of the street is a coastal setting. There are many low-rise buildings and a beach. There is an abundance of vegetation. They sat at an outdoor café which faced the beach and one of the 'floating cities' in the distance. A well-dressed, male waiter approached for their order. Naomi ordered shrimp salad, Ammar chose couscous and her favorite wine.

"I congratulate you on your recent marriage," Ammar smiled.

"Oh, thank you. I did not know that you knew."

He lifts his eyebrow conveying a nonverbal, "Of course I know this; I know everything."

She didn't miss the expression but chose to ignore it.

"I just returned from our honeymoon."

"Any place interesting?"

"You will find it strange. We went to Oklahoma, my choice. My undergraduate degree was focused on the Native American Diaspora. Did you know Oklahoma means Land of the Red Man in Cherokee?"

"No, I did not know that. Isn't that a bit racist?"

She looked startled but responded, "A good question, I am sure, but it did not seem to be perceived that way by the natives I met." She paused, "I am going to look into that."

"I am sure you will."

"Regardless, they have the fabulous museum called FAM for First Americans Museum. Nearby is a native city replica, something like Williamsburg. It is called Tsa-la-gii-tse. Well, it is actually a lived-in city on the Oklahoma River. The architecture is stunning with buildings based on Native American art. The main focus, however, is on current Native American culture. There's a college and a health spa that is really a drug rehab and mental health center. You know, Native Americans were once the unhealthiest segment of the American population."

"But they are so famous for their healthy lifestyle," Ammar offered, slightly interested.

"It is beautiful what they have done to get to that point. They talk about their historic connection with the earth, leading them to where they are now. Now this place is the center of all America for life harmony. in the post-carbon age."

"Hmmm, sounds very Zen," he said a bit sarcastically.

"It is!" she laughed. "We stayed in Tsa-la-gii-tse for a week and it is truly one of the most invigorating places I have ever been."

"Isn't this Oklahoma a flat desert?"

She laughed. "It's pretty flat but not a desert, very green, actually. To your point, there are no high mountains nor oceans to distract one from the main reason for going there. It's simply the best place to get an overdose of Native American culture in a short time; and a great massage," she added raising her eyebrows.

"Well, it seems an odd destination, but you make a great promotional pitch, I must say."

"Yes, if this film doesn't make it, I might have to become an Oklahoma rancher. The truth is, I satisfied two passions there; well, three if you count my husband," she blushed. "I have always loved horses, at least in my imagination, but there, I learned to ride," she gushed as she pointed a finger in the air and a picture of her on horseback hovered above the table. "You can ride for miles along the river. It was so peaceful."

"You look like a natural on the horse. I love the hijab with the chaps and boots."

"That photo is a retouch and, I suppose, a joke from one of my clever children. I actually wore jeans."

"Hilarious! What about your husband?"

"Golf," she laughed. "There are beautiful courses everywhere. Tulsa is only thirty minutes by HSR and has this par three course where each tee and green is an island.

"What are you talking about? I don't know golf terms."

"You should try it, really healthy. Tel Aviv and Ramallah have some great courses."

"I'll have to put it on my bucket list," he winced. "So, when do we get started?" he asked pointedly, ending the honeymoon conversation.

"We already have the entire crew lined up. We were just waiting for your blessing."

"Get to it, then. My money is worth less every day."

"I am going to Ramallah, right now," she said with a firm handshake.

With that they rose and walked to the street where, a driverless car pulled up, a hatch door opened. Naomi got in and was whisked away down the busy street.

He could see in his mind that complex in the desert, a center of Arab achievement and pride, second only to the Haj. It was no trouble to conjure up a vision of what was to happen on this day. He only wished that he could be there, but God willing, that too would come, someday. A new world is not created everyday, but two in one lifetime wasn't bad. The vision faded as the phone rang.

"Yes," said Ammar, not moving from the sink.

"Ammar Abu Bakr, it is Reggie."

This was not surprising, as only Reggie and two others could automatically be put through to him at any time.

"Yes Reggie. Some problem?" he responded.

"There is a problem, yes."

Ammar had looked over at the wall of plasmic energy that was the west wall of his office. He could clearly see that the few men and women of his team allowed in the command post were huddled around their own giant screen illustrating the planned path and nature of The Mission. The problem was outlined to him by Reggie and was the reason for his foul mood as he entered the office that morning.

As he stared again over the harbour scene, Ammar's mind drifted back across the currents of his life that had led to this day. He thought back to that time so long ago.

15 October 2033

Dear Mr. President

I, Ammar Abu Bakr, write to you with a trembling hand. On this day we shall watch our nation bask in the glory of bringing a new world to our nation and to God. Our faithful servants will, God willing, set foot on the surface of the second planet, which we will name Hanbal Jawhar, and claim for the United Arab Nation. The road has been long and our efforts great, yet, . . .

Ammar pondered how he would complete the letter and what repercussions there might be if the mission failed. Truly, he mused, it was incredible that there was even a mission to fail.

Suddenly a large passenger jet lumbering toward the airport made a path across the wall of glass in Ammar's office. Seeing and hearing it, Ammar's mind again drifted.

His thoughts drifted to that dramatic and horrible event that had sparked the birth of this world he now lived in. When those hijacked jets crashed into the World Trade Center at the start of the millennium, a crack developed in the Islamic Crescent which spread and grew larger becoming a faultline and then an earthquake that changed the face of Islam and the Arab world. In spite of his morning aggravation, Ammar sighed at the thought of Asad's immediate, yet childish grasp of the gravity of that event. So many saw it as a triumph, something to assuage and soothe the festering wounds of the wrecked Arab nations. Even at his tender age, in fact because of the clarity of innocence, Asad saw it for what it was, the event that would finally bring down the tottering perverted structure that held so many of his people in a loose, dark, yet unbreachable despair. He sensed that his world would change, that hope would come from exactly the opposite place that Osama-bin-Laden and his Al Qaeda envisioned.

As Ammar tried to turn his thoughts back to the task at hand, he felt an odd burning in his chest. The pain increased until Ammar staggered back a step from the intensity of it. As his mind searched blindly for relief from the pain, it only found more agony as a hammer blow struck him just below the terrible burning. He found himself on his knees on his prayer rug with no idea how he had gotten there. The final trip to the floor was made in a fog of pain and sense of surprise that his life seemed to be ending on this day. Unfair, he thought, as he drifted into unconsciousness, but then fairness had never been part of the world he knew, anyway.

"Ammar," a familiar voice called out to him through a haze of neither seeing nor complete darkness. That voice could not be. If it were the voice, he knew that it most surely was, then most certainly he was dead.

"Yes, I am the Immaculate Conception and no Ammar, you will not die on this day. I will give you my strength for the final journey."

The voice was gone; the one that Ammar knew all too well and never expected to hear again. He knew now that he would live, at least for a while. The pain was gone and he slipped into a deep unconsciousness, yet one that sucked his thoughts from the conscious world he had just left and unraveled them further in this nether world that was neither life nor death.

Across his numbed mind the incredible events that had led to the freeing of the genius and vision of the Arab people now rushed. He saw clearly the destroyed and recreated cities of astounding beauty, the fertile vibrant lands replacing wasteland and again he felt the awakening.

Yet as the events rushed by him, he sensed a warning. He felt deeply in his soul the folly of men before God, always thinking that they would get it right, only to be graphically shown by Him just how far off the mark they were.

But damn it, they had gotten it right! He, Shihab Asad and Jason Satterfield, they had done it together. Yes, they had gotten it right and no spirit nor saint nor shapeless thing from Hades would take that away from him!

"Getting defiant in your coma?" chuckled Ammar to himself.

Almost unbidden from his throat came the words, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, what new world will I awaken in tomorrow?”