

The Presence

Chapter 13 – Travis Givens

“Help was on its way, though even Henrike had no idea what to do if they arrived to find another Roger and Diane situation. Louise had talked about a rescue scenario before Nick’s plane had left London.”

Σ

James had heard Drew saying it all the way back to their truck.

“Adie will go crazy.....We’ll all need to watch her.”

Marwa too, would take it badly. James had more than his fair share of dealing with grieving friends and loved ones. To Adie, Travis had been the father of her child, her lover and, often it seemed, her rock to cling to. Yes, Adie was going to react emotionally to the news. And yes, they would need to watch her. Marwa had thought a lot of Travis and her wounds were still healing. That would make her react badly, it always did. The group would now feel less secure to Marwa and being wounded made it harder to run away if the need arose. It felt wrong to see the death of Travis Givens in terms of a drastic change in the group dynamic. That was what it was though, a potentially dangerous change.

“Do you want me to type his death into the Matrix box ?” Asked Drew.

James stopped with his hand on the truck door. He hadn’t intended to stop her entering their home away from home, but there needed to be an understanding. No one was going to start using the Matrix, until there were ground rules.

“The outside world can’t know.....Not yet.” Said James.

“He’s right; we’ll lose access to the site.” Said Nick. “Louise will call in the army over this.”

“Fuck the site.” Yelled Drew.

“Just give me time to explain.” Said James. “I only want two days.....Otherwise it’ll have all been for nothing. So far, we’ve found nothing that’ll help us deal with the Presence. Do we want to run for home, after achieving nothing ?”

“I can see the wisdom of that, but.....Travis is dead, James.” Said Drew. “We can’t just ignore that. His remains are still in that dreadful place.”

“First thing tomorrow morning, as soon as it’s light. I will go in there and recover his body.” Said James.

“So, if most of us want to call in the cops.....You’ll go along with that ?” Asked Nick.

“I will, you have my word.” Said James.

James opened the truck door and went inside. It was only then that he noticed it, the red marks they all had on their clothing. Not bad wounds, but no one had escaped without any wounds at all. James had a bloody area on his right sleeve, while Nick had a wound on his left trouser leg. James had seen Drew struck across her back and the blood stain went from her shoulders to her waist. Adie took one look at them and obviously noticed the absence of her husband.

“You’re all hurt.....Where is Travis ?” Asked Adie.

“We had some trouble.” Said James. “Travis was killed.....I’m terribly sorry.”

It sounded wrong as he said it, but there wasn’t a good way to tell a woman her husband was dead. Adie looked at them all and began to cry. No screaming or wailing, but those tears.....Her crying

went on and on, even after Marwan and Drew were hugging her. The only sound was a gentle sobbing, which caused him almost physical pain. There were so many ifs and buts. If only he'd stopped Travis from stepping into that offerings pond.....

"Where is he ?" Asked Adie. "Where is his body ?"

"I will go and collect him in the morning.....As soon as it's dawn." Said James.

"And leave him in that place.....You could go now." Said Adie.

"We'll all go, but we have wounds to clean and bandage." Said Nick.

"I'm not sure I could go back there now, Adie." Said James. "In the morning though, after a few hours sleep. I'll be able to enter that dreadful place."

James hugged Adie and much to his relief, she hugged him back. She muttered about going with him in the morning. What was left of Travis though ? It might be just a few bones and some gristle. No, she couldn't be allowed to see that. Then there was her son.....If anything went wrong, poor Silas would be an orphan. Before morning James would find a plausible reason to leave Adie in the truck.

~ ~

Sovi Björlund was beyond pleased with the way the story was progressing. There can come a point, where a really viral piece of news, can turn the journalist involved into a news item. Sovi had almost missed the item on a twenty four hour news service. Marsha was quite keen on channel surfing in the evening, looking through just about every news item she could find. As the hotel had cable, there were a lot of channels to flip through.....

"Hey, look.....It's you Sovi." Marsha had yelled. "You've got blue hair in the picture they have.....They're running through your bio."

"Wow, that picture.....I was a student when I had that hair. What channel are we looking at ?"

"CNN." Marsha had told her.

Mention was made of her leaning towards gender politics and the green movement, though that had all been years ago. They were giving out her bio from twenty years ago, complete with an arrest at a student demo. Did they still can them demos ? Sovi couldn't remember why she'd been arrested. It was all good though, all wonderful. As Andy Warhol had once pointed out, you didn't worry about what the papers printed about you; you just measured it in column inches. Sovi had become a story within a story. That meant Nick's book was going to break records and she'd.....Sovi would be able to afford a few more of life's little luxuries. The really good news ? Not one news media company had mentioned Sovi Björlund being wanted for questioning by the British police. Bad news for the soldier of course, poor bastard. He was about to go through a nonsense trial and then face decades in jail. Sovi was currently looking at an email from Louise at the Tripoli office of her university. A simple matter of fact email, designed to tell nothing to anyone but the people it was intended for.

"It just says they entered the site and need a few days to examine the ruins." Said Den. "Why are you so worried ?"

"No email is ever private" Said Sovi. "It's a kind of code, just in case things turn bad at the temple site. Officially the university are no longer helping Nick. They went into the ruins and haven't checked in since. Louise will give them a few days before an anonymous call is made to the police."

"Crap.....Now I can understand the bad vibe." Said Den.

"Nick has known Louise for years." Said Marsha. "No matter what she might say, she won't just abandon Nick and the others. She'll send Henrike and Naomi to look for them, I guarantee it. It'll take them a couple of days to get there."

“Nick’s last email from Tripoli, mentioned them and someone called Kevin.” Said Sovi. “They’d all volunteered to help at the temple. So yes, I think help will be on its way. Of course, I’m hoping they don’t need help and are busy taking lots of pictures and writing notes in journals.”

“Yeah.....You wait.” Said Den. “They’ll just be too busy to check in.”

“Or the Matrix box has broken.” Added Marsha.

Or, Henrike and the others were heading into more danger than they realised. Sovi was beginning to think of Marsha and Den as her troops and no leader wants to ruin the morale of their troops. Any mention of the relief effort turning into a disaster, would remain unsaid. With luck, it just might be a faulty Matrix box.

~ ~

Help was on its way, though even Henrike had no idea what to do if they arrived to find another Roger and Diane situation. Louise had talked about a rescue scenario before Nick’s plane had left London.

“If you knew Nick Rees like I know him.” Louise had said. “He’s a trouble magnet, but he has a good heart. His group might need help, so we have to plan for it. Nothing official of course.”

Marwa had talked herself into being one of them, on their way to the ruins. In fairness Marwa had been keen on going, but it had all been cooked up by Louise. Winging it wasn’t an exaggeration. There was no proper brief for a rescue mission, just Louise expecting them to do the best they could. Their university project to feed local stray cats, had felt better organised. They were all students though, not the A Team.

“Kevin is waving furiously.” Said Naomi. “I think we’re ready to leave now.”

“About time.” Muttered Henrike.

Two Jeeps to travel in, which was fine. Enough room for the essentials, though he had been hoping for something a bit more sturdy, just in case. In case of what ? Henrike had no idea, no one did. Roger and Diane had died though, so Henrike had been hoping for something a bit more sturdy than a Jeep. An armoured personnel carrier maybe, or a fully armoured Humvee. The University didn’t have those though, so it was two Jeeps are nothing. No weapons of course, they were students after all. Henrike was finishing a piece of post grad research, but Naomi and Kevin were twenty year old degree students. It was criminal really, to take them into such obvious danger.

“I helped at the last Leptis Magna dig.” Said Naomi. “Is this temple anything like the buildings there ?”

“No, nothing like Leptis Magna.” Said Henrike. “The site we’re going too had already been abandoned when the Romans arrived in North Africa.”

“How old is the temple ?.” Asked Naomi. “Louise has so many pictures of it, but she will never answer questions.”

“Ask some and they’ll say the temple was built two hundred thousand years ago.”

“No, that’s crazy.....If it is true, I still don’t believe it.” Said Naomi.

More the sentiment of a lawyer, or a politician. Few if any of the students ended up in archaeology for a living, so she might well end up in a non-degree related job. Henrike’s brother had a two one in psychology, but had ended up in accountancy for a career.

“Did Louise get you to sign the NDA ?” Asked Henrike.

“More a waiver, but she doesn’t know my mum.” Said Naomi. “I stated I wanted time to carry out a project not linked to the university. I waived any and all claims for personal injury.”

“Yeah, Kevin signed something similar.” Said Henrike.

Henrike was trying to get a doctorate and, in theory, not tied to the university. Louis had still got him to sign the NDA, that sounded more like a liability waiver.

“Louise can get me to sign what she likes.” Said Naomi. “If anything happened to me, my mum will go crazy. She’ll be on the first plane out here.”

“Then we need to keep you safe.”

He was only being polite, but politeness is often mistaken for flirting. Naomi gave him a look, which was definitely, the look. Henrike had a long term girlfriend back home though, so the look would never be acted on. Pity really, she definitely seemed his type.

“Oh, he’s doing it again.....Ignoring the approved route out of Tripoli.” Said Naomi.

The city still had a few serious problem, despite what was said on the evening news broadcast. To be safe, the university had set routes to be used when entering and leaving Tripoli. Not just roads where you were less likely to be carjacked. A standard route meant the authorities knew where to start looking, if you went missing.

“He’s going full Lawrence of Arabia on us.....Heading towards the road out of Al-Hashan.” Said Henrike. “Should be alright, but I will talk to him when we stop for the night.”

Kevin was known as Lawrence of Arabia to most of the students. He had the idea that dressing like a local and using backroads, was cool. Henrike had seen it before and it usually led to trouble. A pity really, as Kevin was a pretty decent guy, on the whole.

“Are we sleeping in the Jeeps tonight ?” Asked Naomi.

“I’m afraid so.....We’ll be alright though.”

There was the look from Naomi again and with them in one Jeep and Kevin on his own in the other.....The opportunity for a little fun was obvious. No nookie at the temple was a thing now, widely known, but not officially. Diane and Roger had fucked in the temple, which seemed to have annoyed whatever haunted the place. On the road though, the Jeep parked in the middle of nowhere and their significant others back home.....Far away back home.

“Yes, I’m sure we’ll be alright.” Said Naomi.

When she leant over and kissed his cheek, Henrike didn’t complain. No one would know if they slept together and it wasn’t a crime. It wasn’t as if he was her professor or a tutor. They were both going on an unofficial project that had nothing to do with the university. Casual sex was another thing to blame on Libya, with its hot weather, sunshine, and nothing much else to do after the sun went down.

~ ~

Who went into the temple to recover Travis, had been all about who was fit enough. James was wounded, but looked fine and walked without limping. That was rare, just about everyone had twisted a knee or an ankle and a night’s sleep hadn’t helped. Yes, injuries really did hurt worse the next morning. Nick felt strangely proud of himself, when James had accepted him as fit enough to go down those stairs in the temple.....The steps to the temple beneath a temple. Drew hadn’t been happy at all, when James said the wounds in her back still looked fairly nasty.

“Sorry Drew, this is a quick in and out.....You’ll be welcome as part of the survey team.”

Poor James, he obviously didn’t understand women that well. Nick knew by Drew’s expression, that she’d nurse a grudge against James for a couple of decades. If they all lived of course, which was a long way from being a foregone conclusion.

“I’m not being left in the truck again.” From Marwa.

“And don’t even think of leaving me behind.....Not again.” From Adie.

Nick was an author, not a mathematician. He still managed to work it out though. In the end it was going to be just James and him, going to recover whatever was left of Travis Givens. Not that anyone was going to be left in the truck. All those James considered not to be rescue party material, which was just about everyone, was going to wait just outside the entrance to the ruins. There they all were, sitting on stone blocks, while looking fairly peeved at being excluded from the recovery team. Nick muttered at James, as they entered the temple.

“Are you sure about leaving Drew behind? I could go back and get her. Yes, her back looks bad, but she can be pretty feisty when she wants to be. We need her, James.”

“Just us, Nick.....leave her where she is.” Said James. “Just the two of us is enough.....To wrap up Travis and carry him outside.”

There were no growling noises, as they walked over the mosaic of Baphomet and around the other side of the temple. Nick had been dreading weird sounds, that might test his resolve to recover Travis, or die in the attempt. The only odd sound was the constant drip-drip-drip of water in the middle of a very hot desert.

“The stairs are still there.” Said James.

“Yeah.....I keep expecting them to vanish.” Muttered Nick.

James had run through the plan with all of them and it was all based on one very important assumption. Travis had violated the sanctity of the offerings pond, by standing in it. Therefore, if they avoided the pond completely, they should be safe. If that assumption was wrong.....There was always running away, which had worked pretty well before. A few wounds was always better than dying. They descended the stairs and unlike the first time, they knew the chamber it led down to.

“Wow.....To think primitive man dug this place out of the rocks.” Said Nick.

“The natural, the underlying geological makeup of the site.” Said James. “Louise will talk about primitive man digging into the natural. If we’re not attacked, I intend to spend two full days down here.....Surveying what’s here. There’s an answer waiting to be found.....I know it.”

There were no bits of Travis, Nick had been dreading that. He’d had a nightmare about there being more bloody bits of Travis, than could be feasibly picked up and wrapped in the plastic cover they’d found in their truck. It looked like a wet weather shield for the doors, but they weren’t likely to get a flash flood in the Libyan Desert. Too large of course, they’d cut about a third off the plastic sheet and rolled it up in a back pack. Nick had made a Dexter reference about seeing plastic sheets in their future. No one had laughed.

“There.....It left him a long way from the pool.” Said James, while pointing.

The heap on the floor looked like nothing human, as their lamps ran over it. Much of Travis had been eaten, there wasn’t enough body mass left to make a man the size of Travis. Bloody and glinting slightly, where the tissues were decomposing. A day in that kind of humidity and the smell of corruption hit Nick’s nostrils, while they were still a long way from the body.

“At least.....At least what’s left, is in one piece.” Said Nick.

“I’m so glad I stopped Adie seeing this.” Said James.

She would see her husband’s body eventually, but Nick knew what James meant. She’d be with them all then, her friends. Adie would also feel in control of the situation. Down there, with the stench and the heat.....Drew was still worried Adie might lose her mind.

“You’ve got the plastic cover.” Said James. “Spread it out Nick and.....Keep one eye open for bad guys, as we get this done.”

The jacket Travis had been wearing, had become tangled around what was left of his arms. Nick undid the jacket and tried to remove it, while treating the body with respect. It was impossible, even

with James helping. They ended up tugging and ripping fabric, until the jacket was no longer a problem.

"Fuck, there are bugs.....Of course there had to be bugs." Said Nick.

He'd been expecting it, but hoped there hadn't been time for the foul, wriggling pests to breed in large numbers. He'd been wrong, there were all sorts of insects that devoured the dead and the body was covered in them.

"Bugs that feed on the dead are a mystery." Said James. "Someone can die in the deep desert, miles from anywhere.....Leave it a day and their body is a mass of writhing bugs. Where do they come from ? Anyway.....In the plastic wrap it all goes, bugs and all."

"Drew bought bug spray, several tins of it." Said Nick. "I think she intended to spray inside the truck every night. One tin should kill all the pests that have infested Travis."

Together they lifted the body by its arms, though only half the left arm was still there. The abdomen came away from the lower half of the body. For a few seconds the stench of decay was nearly overwhelming.

"Crap !.....If he hadn't been a friend, I'd suggest leaving him here." Said James.

"Come on.....The legs end shouldn't be too bad." Said Nick.

Again he was only fooling himself. The hips tried to break apart and the stink of corruption, was still wedged in his nostrils. Eventually they had every large piece of Travis, lying on the plastic sheet. Nick went to throw the jacket Travis had been wearing, in with the decaying remains.

"No.....Go through the pockets." Said James. "Adie will need all the ID documents and bank cards."

"Yes.....I wasn't thinking." Said Nick.

A wallet of course, which held several bank cards and a driving license. Keys in one of the jacket pockets and a neatly handwritten list of phone numbers for members of the extended Givens family. All very mundane, but it would all matter to Adie. Nick threw the jacket over the body. Both of them pulled the sheeting tight around the remains and then used a whole roll of duct tape to seal everything up. It needed to be sealed up.....There was no freezer to hold their friend's mortal remains.

"Not perfect.....But it'll do." Said James. "Come on; let's get Travis out of this awful place."

"What the hell.....Look, by the pool." Said Nick.

As Nick had turned he'd seen something near the pool; the shape of a man. Glowing slightly, which was how he'd seen him, or maybe her. Too far and his light wasn't showing enough, to be certain of anything. Nick was sure of one thing; the glowing shape meant them no harm.

"We can leave Travis and run.....Come back for him later." Said James.

"No, all we've ever done is run away." Said Nick. "I'm sure whatever is near the pool, means us no harm. Personally I think it's the one we never name.....To hell with it; there is no doubt in my mind. That glowing entity is Aiwass."

"Don't be crazy, Nick." Said James. "Never name any of them, it's far too dangerous."

"We talked openly about Baphomet."

"That's different."

"Bull shit.....Over there, looking at us is Aiwass....Aiwass....Aiwass." Said Nick. "Considered by Aleister Crowley to be a guardian entity of some kind, an angel perhaps, or even a deity. Aleister would have known of course; he had genuine power."

"Well done.....It seems to have heard you." Said James. "Grab your end of the body.....We'll walk slowly and try to look harmless. It might ignore us."

"It's Aiwass.....We'll be alright."

“Shut up.....Will you please shut up.” Said James.

Nick picked up the feet end of the sealed up plastic, while James lifted the head end. They walked, carefully and slowly back towards the stairs. Nick was angry though and not ready to shut up. He would though, until they were back at the truck. Then he'd have plenty to say.

“It's glowing more brightly.” Said James.

“Aiwass is glowing more brightly.” Said Nick.

James gave him the stink eye, but didn't contradict him, or tell him to shut up. Closer now, but the creature near the pool was no easier to see. Two arms, two legs and a head. There was a nebulous feel to it though and the glow didn't help.

“Did you.....Tell me you saw that.” Said Nick.

“I saw it.” Said James.

The glowing entity he thought of as Aiwass, had stepped into the pond. It was in almost the same place where Travis was when he'd stepped into the red algae covered water. The entire pool was glowing, as the entity began to stride through the water. Tragic from a historical point of view, it had to be damaging some of the priceless offerings to very ancient deities.

“We need to pick up the pace and get out of here.” Said James.

“And miss whatever is about to happen.....I think we're intended to see this.” Said Nick.

What was left of Travis was still heavy. James tried to move faster, but Nick deliberately kept to a snail's pace. By the time the wolf like creature appeared out of the wall, they were quite close to the offerings pool. What was probably the minion of something dark and ancient, ignored them. It moved towards the glowing entity and obviously liked to keep to plans that worked. As it had done to Travis, it locked its jaws around the throat of the glowing creature.....And pulled.

“If the minion wins, we run.....Agreed ?” Asked James.

“No problem, I'll be right behind you. But it won't win, it can't win against Aiwass.”

As the wolf creature bit and twisted, Nick wondered if Aiwass was about to die. When two more of the brutes came out of the wall, he was feeling much less confident that Aiwass would win. Quite quickly, there had to be twenty of the wolf beasts, all biting the guardian entity and using their claws on him, or her, or it. Not that they appeared to be doing any damage. No blood in the pool and no obvious wounds resulting from all that effort. More appeared out of the wall and then even more.

“It can't beat that many.” Said James. “I mean.....It's not even fighting back.”

No one seemed to be hurting anyone, despite all the biting and use of claws. For a moment Nick got a good look at the very human face of Aiwass. Male probably, though there just wasn't enough light to be totally sure. The guardian entity looked so sad. It was when the sad face smiled, that Nick thought they might be a little too close to the pool.

“He's going to do something huge, I know it.” Said Nick.

The water in the pool began to bubble, as if it was boiling. When the hot, humid air reached them, it was obvious that the pool really was boiling. The minion beasts didn't seem to like standing in boiling water, but they were still alive, still biting and clawing at Aiwass.

“Why doesn't he do something a bit more.....Violent ?” Muttered James.

Aiwass knocked the wolf beasts away with ease and turned towards the wall they'd all appeared out of. He placed both hands on the wall, which began to vibrate. The water boiled and the minions looked to be in pain. When it happened, it was sudden. A crack opened in the wall, from deep down in the pool, up to the ceiling. The boiling water poured into the crack, which was expanding.

“They're dying.....It's killed them.” Said James.

They fell over as if they were stone statues. One hit the side of the pool and shattered into a mass of stone fragments. They all died, every single one of them. Something changed in the vast chamber too, as if a darkness had been lifted. Not that Aiwass waited for praise, or even a thank you. The guardian entity vanished, leaving a steaming pool of water and at least fifty dead wolf beasts.

“Wow.....I told you he’d take care of them.” Said Nick. “I wish Drew was here with her camera. When we come back, I bet the dead beasts have gone.....Absorbed back into the wall, or something like that.”

“At least we’ll be able to safely survey the entire chamber.” Said James. “I feel it too.....Something very nasty has left this place.”

It was immature, but Nick had to do it. For Travis, but he also did it to get a little pay back for feeling terrified and being forced to run away. He kicked one of the fallen beasts, causing its leg to shatter. The pool was now empty of water, which showed it to be full of artefacts and weapons.

“Another mystery.” Said Nick. “Some items in the pool are really old, but the gold oil lamp.....Wouldn’t surprise me if it was made in Turkey, no earlier than the eighteen hundreds.”

“We’re not looters, Nick.” Said James. “I’m sure you’ll get that book deal.”

“I wasn’t suggesting we robbed the place.” Said Nick. “Louise might keep her job, when she carts this lot back to Tripoli.”

It was strange to find offering covering thousands of years, in the same temple. It was a puzzle for another day, when Travis had been wrapped up in yet more plastic and Adie had grieved a little. Nick was looking forward to them returning and doing a proper survey of the chamber. They picked up Travis and headed towards the stairs.

“I’ve just realised.” Said Nick. “We’ve been battered about like bowling pins. People have died and there has been no way to fight back. It’s been nothing but bad news, with us losing every single battle.”

“Do you have a point, Nick ?” Asked James. “Or are you trying to make me feel depressed ?”

“You must see it, James ? Not us fighting back, I’ll give you that.” Said Nick. “Aiwass was fighting for us and he easily beat those things. We’ve finally won one, James. If you can’t give a cheer, a little whoop will do.”

“Whoop.” Muttered James.

~ ~

Betsy Nagle was getting quite fond of Suki. Not on a permanent basis, but like grandchildren, borrowed cats were fun and you could give them back if they became annoying. Quite small for a fully grown cat, Suki seemed to love sleeping on her chest, while Betsy watched a little Netflix.

“You’re very cute, but don’t get too comfortable.” Betsy muttered. “Drew will want you back when she gets home.”

Florence was feeling well enough to return to the office, so things were getting back to normal. The hospital were still pestering poor Florence. They needed to sign her off their books, or something like that. Otherwise they might be liable for malpractice litigation. Florence had decided that now she was free of the place, she wasn’t going back, not even to sign a form. Betsy had asked her solicitors to look into the matter. Carl Wood of Holland Klein & Martin, would get the hospital running for cover.

“No Suki.....Fuss about as much as you like. No more treats tonight.” Muttered Betsy.

Betsy stroked Drew’s cat and reached for a mint chocolate, out of a box a happy client had given her. A good client, one who was little hassle and whose screenplays earned her a good percentage. Yet,

for some reason Nick was hard work for little return. She was hoping his new book might change all that. The phone rang, the landline that rarely rang in the evening.

"I bet it's Nick.....Or that woman who runs the college in Tripoli." Betsy muttered.

Another advantage of having a pet. Betsy could talk to herself for hours, while deluding herself into thinking she was discussing her business with Suki. She was actually considering getting a cat of her own.

"Hello, Betsy here."

"Hi, this is Sovi.....Is this a good time?"

Everyone asked that when they called outside of business hours. As if she was going to say no and disconnect the call.

"No problem, I'll pause the movie." Said Betsy.

"Sorry.....I just need a word in your role as Nick's agent."

"Makes a change from his cat wrangler and general dogsbody." Said Betsy. "Carry on.....What trouble is he in now?"

Betsy could hear Sovi fiddling with papers at the other end, never a good sign. Papers meant files and files might mean litigation, or trouble with the authorities. Mix Nick and Drew with Sovi and the problem might be litigation and the cops. Maybe even foreign cops.

"I was wondering if copyright might cover the story?" Asked Sovi. "After years of being a back street hack, I understand a certain amount, but author's right are outside of my experience. As Nick has pitched the idea of a book to several publishers.....In your opinion, does that mean he has copyright on the story itself?"

"I hope you're not thinking of setting your solicitors on Nick Rees?" Asked Betsy.

"No, but I can see why you might think that." Said Sovi. "I am told by the paper carrying my story, that several reporters are about to leave for Libya. Not their people, these are dreadful cowboys, who'd sell their grannies for two columns on the front page. They're unstoppable, but I was hoping copyright law might slow them down a bit. They'll arrive in Libya with a bag full of hard currency; enough to bribe information out of anyone. Can copyright law slow them down?"

Betsy knew of a story, but it had affected a client of hers, so no details for Sovi. A Politian had agreed a huge figure by a publisher, for his full and uncensored kiss and tell biography. Sadly his mistress had published her book first and it was far more sexually explicit than his.

"I have had experience with this and I'd say no." Said Betsy. "I can give you an example of advice for a fictitious matter....I'm sure you get my drift."

"Yes.....Fictitious advice away, oh wise one." Said Sovi.

"If the tabloid you're working for has deep pockets.....They could easily pay off quite a few in authority in.....That fictional country. They could buy enough cops to make life for the cowboy, story rustling bums.....Very uncomfortable. Does that help?"

"It helps.....Remind me never to annoy you, Betsy." Said Sovi. "I'll let you know how things work out."

Betsy needed to pee and Suki was begging for treats again. A good twenty minutes went by, before Betsy was watching a romance movie on Netflix, while the cat slept on her chest.

"If the cowboys do find the temple, Suki.....They'll have the demon to deal with."

~ ~

Henrike had noticed it before, the students loved to drive the Jeeps. Personally, he'd rather lean back in the seat and sort of nap the day away, but the likes of Kevin and Naomi.....They seemed happiest behind the wheel. Less to run into of course, in the Libyan Desert, than the towns and cities

they'd come from. They'd have full driving licenses though; Louise was a stickler for getting that kind of thing right. His cheap SatNav device beeped and Henrike began to wake up.

"Three miles from ground zero, Naomi." Said Henrike. "No telling what we might find, so....."

"Be ready for anything, I know." Said Naomi.

He'd bought the SatNav himself from a tech place near Marble Arch in London. It was getting old now and the desert heat wasn't good for it. The three miles might well be five miles, but however you looked at it, they were nearly there.

"I saw some of the pictures Roger took.....I hope we find them alive." Said Naomi.

"We're not officially here." Said Henrike. "If things are really bad, as bad as they can be.....We head straight back to Tripoli and Louise will arrange for a call to the cops. Nothing gets tapped into the Matrix, that's important."

"Marwa went with them.....She's my friend." Said Naomi. "We once snogged the same guy at a party."

A quick glance while still trying to wake up and Naomi was grinning at him. She'd be fine if they found everyone dead, more victims of the fictional wild dogs. Naomi might cry, but she'd handle it and stick to the plan. Kevin though, Henrike wasn't so sure about him.

"The heat.....I know it's a desert, but it's so damned hot." Muttered Naomi.

"This used to be one of the most fertile regions in Africa, about fifty or sixty thousand years ago. Then the rainy season moved south and.....This part of North Africa became a bit of a hell hole."

"Hey.....I can see the top of the temple." Said Naomi.

Henrike had been sleeping with Naomi in the back of the Jeep. All fine, that was safer than using one of the tents. What wasn't part of the usual procedure was them having sex, lots of very good sex. That was part of the problem with Kevin. Not that he was jealous, but.....It's hard to connect with anyone if you're in a Jeep most of the night, shagging each other's brains out. Henrike was already looking forward to a proper bed, with a sprung mattress. The metal floor of the Jeep, wasn't doing his knees much good.

"Good spot.....Wave at Kevin, or something." Said Henrike. "Point a lot at the temple and he'll get the idea."

There were bits of rubble now and pieces of broken stone. Naomi drove well though and quickly had them parked next to a large truck. It was a light truck of dubious quality, according to Louise. It looked larger than Henrike had expected and seemed perfect for the job it had been bought for.

"Now that is a proper truck.....We should have one of those." Said Henrike.

"No sign of anyone." Said Naomi.

"We'll try the Temple.....But no going inside."

Kevin was the sensible one; he tried the truck door and declared it to be locked. The three of them walked towards the temple and found Marwa and Nick near the entrance. Marwa was carrying an assault rifle, which definitely wouldn't have pleased Louise. They weren't officially there though, so Henrike didn't mention the rifle.

"Louise didn't send us.....We're not really here." Said Naomi.

"Still.....As we're here. Do you need any help?" Asked Henrike.

It was how they looked and the smell of unwashed bodies. They'd have been kitted out with enough water to have a what Louise called a cat-lick wash most mornings. And they'd have alcohol based gels to rub over themselves. Yet there was that smell.....There was something in their eyes too, a look Henrike had seen on the faces of refugees, in Yemen. Something dreadful had happened to Nick and his team.

"Lamps, ours have taken a lot of punishment." Said Nick. "We're only surveying during the day, but the lower temple is always dark. It'd be appreciated, if you could spare a few lamps."

"We've got quite a few.....I'll go and get them." Said Kevin.

"Thank you." Said Nick.

"Glad to help, we've got ration packs too. American army ration packs Louise managed to get from somewhere." Said Henrike. "A bit better than surviving on tins and glorified trail mix."

"Oh.....Proper food." Said Marwa. "It's not been that long since we ate decent food, but it's been too long."

"I hate to ask, but you guys look so.....What happened here ?" Asked Henrike.

"Tell them Nick, or I will." Shouted Marwa.

Nick's eyes looked at Marwa, as if he was begging for mercy.

"It's been a bad day today." Said Nick. "We'd hoped not to, but there was no way to avoid it."

"We buried Travis just after dawn." Said Marwa. "He'd been killed by something.....Call it another dog attack if you like. No one ever listens to the truth. Stop looking at me like that, Nick. Someone has to know these things."

"Was anyone else hurt ?" Asked Naomi.

"Everyone, we've all got wounds that are healing very slowly." Said Nick. "No one else died though, if that's what you mean. We're now surveying the deep temple. Mainly so that Travis Givens didn't die in vain. His wife agreed to have him buried out here; amidst all the sand and dirt.....Can you imagine that ?"

"You see.....His death has to mean something." Said Marwa. "We had a meeting and.....We voted to stay here and finish the work."

Henrike was beginning to understand. The look on their faces, the filthy clothing. It was desperation, mixed with a determination to grab some kind of victory out of a long line of defeats. Kevin returned with four lamps, which was all the spare lamps they had. Still, the poor bastards needed them more than they did. To think that Adie Givens had seen her husband buried in that awful place. Henrike hated to ask, but above all else, he was an archaeologist.

"I don't remember any mention of a deep temple." Said Henrike.

"Do you want to see it ?" Asked Nick. "We had our first victory recently; a few of them died.....The wild dogs if you want something for your notes. Since then we haven't been attacked. So, do you want to see the temple below the temple ?"

"It is worth seeing.....As big as the Albert Hall, according to James." Said Marwa.

It went against all the instructions from Louise. If she'd been insistent on one thing, none of them was to enter the ruins, under any circumstances. There was Kevin though, grinning and nodding his head. If anything, Naomi looked even more keen. Despite the danger, Henrike wanted to see the temple chamber too. At the end of the day, all three of them were archaeologists.

"Lead on, Nick." Said Henrike. "It seems we are going to see a temple the size of the Albert Hall."

~

~