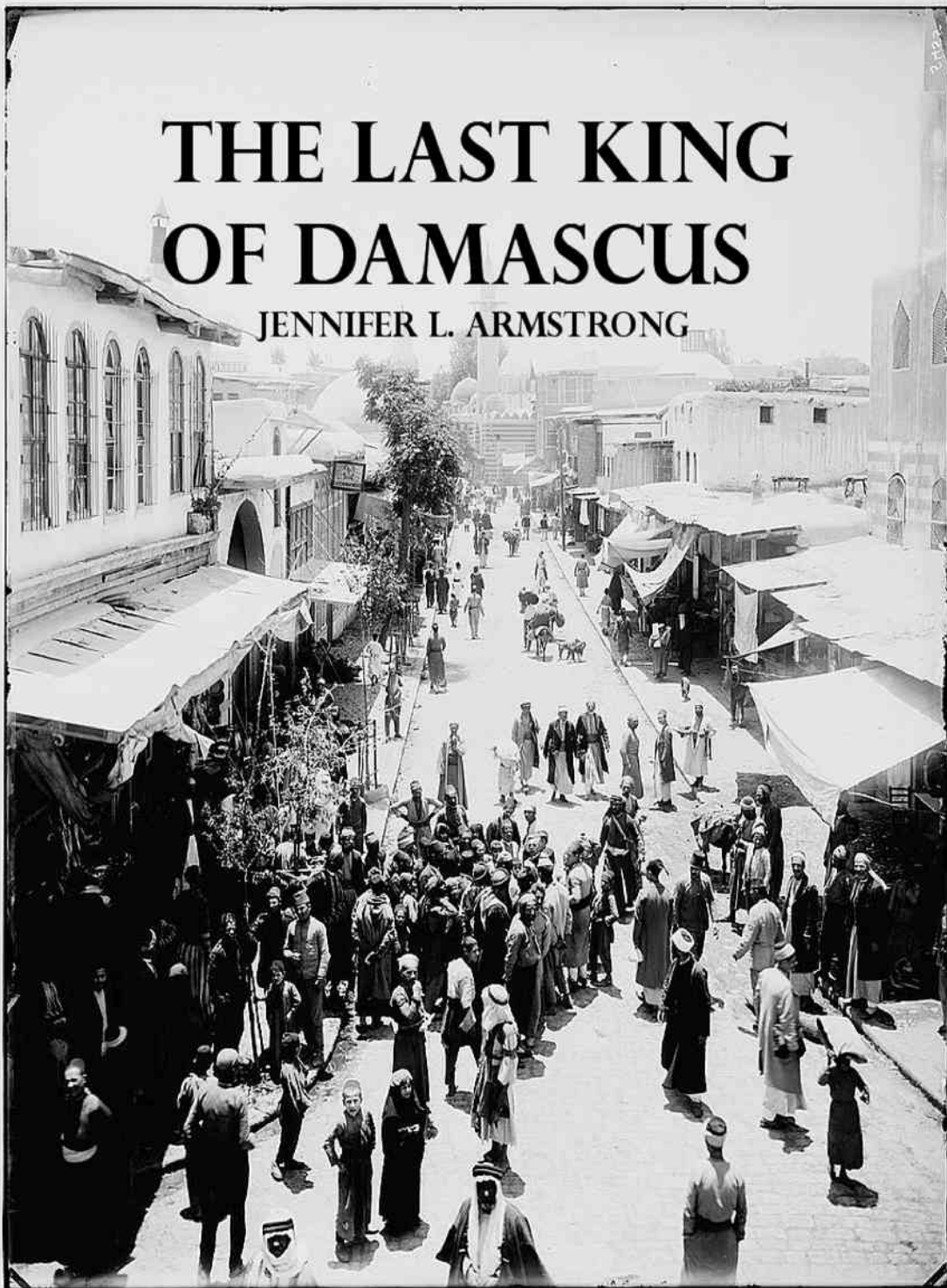


# THE LAST KING OF DAMASCUS

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## **MONDAY ~ ARRIVING IN A NEW COUNTRY**

Thomas Lawrence adjusted his sunglasses.

It was unbearably hot. Already sweat was forming under his arms and running down his back. He looked around and saw that he wasn't the only one with the problem. A lot of men and even some of the women had blotchy sweat stains on their clothing.

He was outside the Damascus International Airport, waiting for his second (or was it third?) cousin, to pick him up.

The late afternoon sun seemed to be shining directly on him.

This whole trip had been his mom's idea. Her name was Saramma but it had changed to Umm Thomas, the day he was born. It was an Arabic thing. Even his own name reflected his Arabic heritage because he had been named after his paternal grandfather, Thomma.

But this was where his genealogy got complicated. His mother had an Arabic mother and an English father. His father had an Arabic father and an English mother. So, when his parents met at the University of Toronto, they had had a lot in common. They knew what it was like to grow up in a household that spoke both Arabic and English and mixed the two cultures.

But growing up in Canada, he had learned very little about his Arabic heritage. In fact, with his dark hair and dark eyes, he was often mistaken for Italian.

What had brought about the trip was a question he had asked his mom a few months earlier.

"What kind of name is Lawrence?" he had asked at the dinner table. "It's not Arabic but Idd Thomma is Arabic, right?"

He'd never met his grandfather, Idd Thomma, but a photo was sitting on the buffet in their dining room, along with all of the other Syrian relatives.

His mother had looked across the table at his father and said, "That's something Idd Thomma should tell you, himself."

His father, who had been reaching for an olive, paused and looked thoughtful.

"That's a good idea," he said. "It's the right time in his life, I think..."

From that moment forward his fate was sealed.

He was being dragged to downtown Toronto to get a passport. He was being dragged to the travel agency to get a plane ticket. Telephone calls to Syria were being made to arrange his accommodation with relatives.

His protest that he knew no Arabic was met with his mother's assurance that everyone in Syria knew English and if they didn't know English, then they knew French. His mom knew that he'd gotten 62% in his last French class, but that didn't stop her.

So, here he was, sweating it out in Damascus.

"Ahfwan! Ahfwan! Excuse me!" A tall slim dark-haired young man hurried up to him. "Thomma? Thomma Lawrence?"

"Thomas," he said. "It's Thomas."

"Na-am! Yes!" said the young man. "I am Ninan. Your cousin!"

He held out his hand and Thomas gave it a firm handshake.

His cousin laughed.

“That’s too strong, cousin! When you meet a friend you should make it more...” Ninan paused to think of a word. “...*soft*. You know, or else someone thinks you are an enemy challenging them.”

His first lesson in Arabic culture.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said, leaning down to pick up his suitcase. Ninan grabbed a carry-on bag.

“How old are you, cousin?” asked Ninan.

“Seventeen,” he said. “You?”

“Twenty. Do you go to madrasa? School?”

They were heading away from the main building towards the airport.

“Uh, done with high school. Thinking about college. Not sure what I’m going to major in.”

“*Major in?*” asked Ninan, not understanding the phrase.

“Uh, you know, what I’m going to study. What I’d focus on.”

“Ahhh,” said Ninan. “I see. I *major in* Engineering and Architecture.”

“That sounds like a safe thing to do.”

“Safe?”

“I mean, it sounds like you’ll make a lot of money.”

“Yes, I guess that is important. I have always been interested in the buildings of my people. Damascus is full of beautiful buildings and I want to build something beautiful someday too.”

“Sounds noble.”

They had reached a small blue car. It wasn’t anything he recognized. Maybe they made cars here in the Middle East. The windows were down and he soon found out why. No air-conditioning.

Ninan was a fast and kind of scary driver. Thomas envied his freedom. He’d passed his driver’s test but his parents had told him if he wanted a car, he’d have to buy it himself.

“So, who am I staying with?” he asked Ninan.

“Idd Thomma and his daughter, Mariam. She’s a widow, no kids. So she takes care of Idd Thomma.”

“What’s he like?”

Ninan laughed.

“He talks about one thing. Only one thing. How his Ab, father, rode with Faisal in the great Arab Revolt against the Turks.”

“Who? What?”

Ninan, despite that he was in the middle of making a lane change, looked at Thomas with surprise.

“You don’t know about the Arab Revolt?”

Thomas shook his head.

Nina smiled.

“Well, you will by the time Idd Thomma is done with you. But I promise you this, I will stop by as many times as I can to take you out and to give you a break.”

That sounded kind of ominous. Give him a break from *what*? What had his mother gotten him into?

He stared out the window, partly to feel as much breeze as he could and partly to take in the new sights. The terrain was rugged and the buildings were infrequent, though the traffic on the highway was brisk. The cars were full of travelers coming to and from the airport – mostly Arabs and many of the men in the traditional keffiyahs and the women in the hijabs.

“It seems kind of quiet for a city,” he said.

“Oh, this isn’t Damascus,” explained Ninan. “The airport is outside the city.”

Thomas’s head swiveled at the sight of some goats by the side of the road with a Bedouin boy watching them.

It didn’t take them long to reach Damascus and then Thomas got his first glimpse of an Arab city.

What surprised him was the number of modern buildings, high rises, and signs with English. Some of the names were familiar hotels and familiar products. But it was all interspersed with Eastern style. And everywhere he turned there was a minaret in the distance indicating a mosque.

The roads were crowded with closed in shops as well as open air vendors who were selling everything from live chickens to high heeled shoes. Several booksellers just had their books on racks on the sidewalk and didn’t seem to have any more claim to that particular space than anyone else.

The driving was really freaky. He wasn’t sure if there were even lanes. Everyone just seemed to follow the person in front of them and there was a lot of honking.

Idd Thomma and ‘Ammi (Aunt) Mariam lived in an apartment on a street that was lined with apartments. They were low-rise compared to the ones in Toronto, mostly five or six stories. The street had a shabby but graceful look. Some of the doors were painted bright blue or green and a lot of the windows had flower boxes.

After parking in front of one of the apartments, Ninan pushed open an iron fence that guarded the premises, and then through a set of wooden doors.

There was no sign of an elevator, only a spiraling staircase. Ninan, who was carrying Thomas’s suitcase, had no problem climbing the five stories, but Thomas was huffing and puffing.

Before Ninan could knock, a door was swung open and a dark-haired, middle-aged woman in a print dress and an apron was suddenly on them, hugging both of the young men, kissing their cheeks.

“Marhaban! Marhaban! Hello! Hello! Ahlan wa-sahlan! Welcome!”

She had her hands firmly on their backs and they were being escorted into a small, but bright, living room. The walls were painted white and were decorated with red-patterned tapestries and gold-framed paintings of birds. There were colourful cushions on the cream couches. In the corner, in a wood and wicker chair, sat an old man.

“Idd Thomma!” said ‘Ammi Mariam. “The boys are here! Look! It’s Thomas! All the way from Canada!”

Idd Thomas, with his full head of grey hair and his sparkling dark eyes, looked like he’d be a lot of fun to get to know. His smile was broad. He might have been old, but he gave the impression of great energy.

“Sit! Sit!” he said, waving to one of the couches. He put a book that he had been reading down on the table beside him. “So, you have come at last, Thomma?”

Somehow, Thomas didn't want to correct him on the name. He resigned himself to being Thomma.

"Yes, grandpa. Idd, I mean. I'm here."

"Come to learn about your glorious past, I hope? Did your father tell you of how his Idd Geverghese rode with Faisal in the great Arab Revolt?"

Ninan jabbed Thomas in the ribs, as if to say, *I told you so*, but Thomas was puzzled.

"Geverghese?" he said. "Dad always called him George."

Idd Thomma shrugged. "That is probably the English equivalent. Named for the saint, of course."

Thomas nodded. He didn't know about any saint.

"Yes," said Idd Thomma, leaning back in his chair. "Idd Geverghese was born in 1900. The great Arab Revolt began right here in Damascus. You see, we were under Turkish rule at the time..."

His story was interrupted by 'Ammi Mariam coming out of the kitchen with a tray full of food.

"You must be so hungry," she said, putting the tray down on the coffee table. It looked a lot like the food his mother would make – pita bread, hummus, a bowl of olives, dates, and of course, the ever-present coffee.

"Beteb tishrub qahwi?" she asked, holding up the brass coffee pot.

"Uh, yes," he said.

"Na'am," said Ninan.

'Ammi Mariam handed each young man a small brass cup with the thick, dark liquid.

"So," continued Idd Thomma, accepting a cup from 'Ammi Mariam. "You know about Faisal, of course?"

Thomas shook his head as 'Ammi Mariam passed him the plate of bread.

Idd Thomma's eyebrows raised.

"Well, we start from the beginning then..."

"Ma hella! Ma hella! Not now!" said 'Ammi Mariam, sitting down on the other couch. "Ba'dane. Later! Now, let's hear about your flight," she said to Thomma. "It was long, na'am?"

"Yes," said Thomas, dipping a piece of his bread into the hummus. "But I slept a lot. And they showed some movies."

"Ah, that is good that you can sleep on a plane," said 'Ammi Mariam, approvingly. "Here, try these dates." She held the bowl out to him.

"These are good!" he said as he tried a few.

'Ammi Mariam laughed.

"You don't get fresh dates in Canada!" she said with delight. "These are fresh!"

"It makes a difference," agreed Thomas.

"You will take some back to your mother," said 'Ammi Mariam. "She probably misses fresh dates. Ihkli, tell me, where does your mother do her shopping?" 'Ammi Mariam leaned forward in anticipation of the answer.

"Well," said Thomas, chewing and swallowing another date before answering.

"We have big grocery stores, of course, and Mom usually buys all of her stuff there."

'Ammi Mariam looked disappointed.

“But there is an Arabic section of Toronto,” said Thomas quickly. “It’s on Lawrence Avenue, at around Pharmacy.”

“Lawrence Avenue?” said Idd Thomma. “That is a coincidence, yes?”

Thomas, thinking of their last name, nodded.

“So, we go there too. And that’s where Mom buys all of her nuts and dried fruits. Oh, and coffee. And there’s a bakery where we buy all sorts of things...” Unfortunately, Thomas couldn’t remember the names of any of the pastries his mom would buy, though he enjoyed eating them.

“And we always have falafel when we’re there,” he concluded.

Ninan laughed.

“Here, I survive on falafel! I will take you to the best place...”

“Well, it sounds like your mother is OK,” said ‘Ammi Mariam, clearly relieved that her relatives had proper Arabic foods, even in Canada.

Ninan left after the meal.

Thomas was taken to a small but pleasant bedroom. His window looked down into a communal courtyard that had a few trees but was mostly patio stones. Despite that it was now evening, some children were still playing.

After putting his clothing away in the dark wooden dresser he returned to the living room.

Idd Thomma and ‘Ammi Mariam were watching a small television. They were laughing. Thomas sat down on one of the couches. Idd Thomma was laughing so hard that he had to occasionally wipe the tears from his eyes.

When an ad came on, Idd Thomma turned to Thomas.

“Did you understand any of it?”

Thomas shook his head.

“Not even a word?” Idd Thomma was puzzled. “Don’t you know any Arabic?”

Thomas shook his head again.

Idd Thomma’s eyes widened in horror and he turned to ‘Ammi Mariam. “Not a word,” he said, shaking his head. “Why do you not learn any Arabic?” he asked, turning back to Thomas.

Thomas didn’t want to say, *because it’s boring*.

“Uh, I guess I’ve just been busy...”

“Busy? Busy?” Idd Thomma looked like he might stand up from his chair.

“Who is too busy too learn about his own heritage? My father fought with Faisal so that we would have the right to speak Arabic...” Idd Thomma’s voice was rising.

“Iskut! Iskut! Hush!” said ‘Ammi Mariam to her father as the show started again.

Reluctantly, Idd Thomma turned his attention back to the screen.

At first, Thomas was a little ticked that his grandfather had been so hard on him. But he decided to shrug it off. After all, everybody here seemed to know English really well even though most of them would never travel to North America. So being bilingual was probably just the normal thing with them. Idd Thomma probably thought that if he knew English, everybody in North America should know Arabic.

Thomas settled back in the couch to watch the show. But without understanding any of it, it got boring pretty quickly, so he soon excused himself to go to bed.

## TUESDAY ~ THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

When he woke up, and came out of his room rubbing his eyes, he found out from Idd Thomma that 'Ammi Mariam had already left to go food shopping. She'd left some pita bread and boiled eggs for his and Idd Thomma's breakfast.

Idd Thomma was sitting in his chair in the corner, reading. He put his book down and smiled when Thomma came out.

"My eyesight is not so good," said Idd Thomma. "What is that over on the floor? Has my dear Mariam dropped her shopping list?"

Thomas headed over to the door where there seemed to be a piece of paper.

"I dunno," he said, picking it up and bringing it back to Idd Thomma. "I think it's a note. Looks like someone pushed it under the door."

"Strange," said Idd Thomma. "What does it say?"

Thomas was staring at the paper.

"Uh, it says, *Please help me. I need you. Please.* Then there's a lot of Arabic writing."

Idd Thomma shook his head.

"Crazy joke," he said, standing up and heading into the kitchen. "Somebody being silly. Do you like lime tea, Thomma?" he called back over his shoulder.

"Uh, sure," said Thomas, still staring at the paper. He didn't think it was a joke. It sounded serious. Since it had been pushed under the door, it could have come from anyone. It could have even come from someone who saw him arrive yesterday and thought that maybe he could help them.

But what did the Arabic writing say?

One way to find out! Ninan!

Ninan had left him his phone-number and told him to call anytime. Well, this was anytime.

"Uh, Idd Thomma?" he called out in the direction of the kitchen. "Can I call Ninan?"

"Of course," was the reply. "Get that sleepy-head out of bed!"

But Ninan hadn't been sleeping. He had been on the way out the door to his first class of the day. Thomas explained about the note and he was instantly interested.

"I'll come over right after my classes," he said. "On Tuesday I only have two classes so I should be there before lunch."

Idd Thomma shuffled out of the kitchen with the tray of bread, eggs and lime tea. He set it down on the coffee table and before starting, said a prayer in Arabic.

Now that they were alone, Thomas braced himself for a history lecture. The great Arab Revolt. But Idd Thomma surprised him.

He asked a lot of questions about his father and mother. What were they up to these days? Was his mother still working in a library? Did his father still dream of buying a motorcycle? It was news to Thomas that his father had ever dreamed of buying a motorcycle.

Idd Thomma also asked him about school. What were his favourite subjects? Did he like to read?

Just to be polite, Thomas asked Idd Thomma what he was reading.

Idd Thomma picked up the book on the table and handed it to him. "It is the Bible," he said. "Ktab il-mqaddas. Do your parents take you to church?"

Thomas nodded as he looked at the Arabic book. It had never occurred to him that the Bible could be in Arabic too.

"I will too. In Syria, we are Nasara, Christians. If you want to say I am a Christian, just say, ana Nasrani."

"Ana Nasrani," repeated Thomas.

There was a knocking at the door and Thomas was sent to open it for 'Ammi Mariam who came in with mesh bags full of Arabic bread, a chunk of cheese, nuts, tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant and a whole leg of lamb. There were also some bottles of wine.

"It is a big celebration tonight," explained Idd Thomma.

'Ammi Mariam had given them a big smile before heading straight to the kitchen with her purchases.

"What are we celebrating?"

Idd Thomma laughed.

"You, of course! You coming to Damashq. 'Ammi Mariam will spend all day in the kitchen making her famous cheesecake and almond cookies and baba ghanouj and tabbouleh and lamb and rice...Mmmm!" Idd Thomma rubbed his stomach in anticipation. "A real feast! And you will get to meet everyone."

After breakfast, Idd Thomma returned to his Bible. Thomas carried the tray into the kitchen. 'Ammi Mariam took it, but shoed him out of the kitchen when he asked her if she needed any help.

It was just as well because half an hour later, Ninan was at the door.

Idd Thomma nodded his greeting and the two young men went into Thomas's room.

"See," said Thomas, pulling the note out of his back pocket. "Idd Thomma thinks it's a joke. I think it's real. What does the Arabic say?"

Ninan was quickly skimming the note.

"I agree with you," he said. "The Arabic part says, I will be at the National Museum of Damascus special exhibit at 1:00. Please help me. Tell no one."

"Wow," said Thomas. "What should we do?"

"Go to the National Museum of Damascus, of course. Come on!"

They exited the bedroom.

"Idd Thomma?" said Ninan. "Is it OK if I take Thomas to the Museum. I think he needs a bit of culture." He laughed at the look on Thomas's face.

"That's a good idea, Ninan," said Idd Thomma. "But bring him back by khamsi!"

"Five o'clock," nodded Ninan.

And they were out the door, running down the staircase to Ninan's car parked outside.

"I'm hungry," said Ninan. "Let's pick up some falafels first."

Thomas agreed. He was always up for eating.

As they drove through the crowded streets Thomas's head couldn't stop swiveling. There were cars of all kinds, trucks loaded with produce, men with donkey carts loaded with produce, a man on horseback, bicycles, yellow taxis. It seemed wherever he turned he saw something new. He wouldn't have been surprised to see



Bedouins on camels. Everybody seemed to have equal claim to the road but Thomas pitied any pedestrians that tried to cross it.

There were modern buildings as well as run-down old buildings. A lot of tall hotels. Many stores had signs in Arabic and English.

The air was filled with smog and Thomas wished that Ninan had air-conditioning so that they didn't have to keep the windows down.

Ninan turned down a quieter street and pulled up in front of a small open-air restaurant.

"I'll run in and get them," he said. "You can stay here and make sure the car does not get towed away." Ninan had double-parked.

Thankfully, in the two minutes that Ninan was gone, nobody did anything worse than honk at the car.

Ninan handed Thomas a falafel sandwich wrapped in paper.

"Mmm," said Thomas taking a bite. "Spicy. Spicier than the ones we get."

Ninan reached into a paper bag and handed him a bottle of Coke.

"Hey!" said Thomas. "This is cool! Arabic writing!"

"What did you expect?" asked Ninan, his mouth full as he started the engine.

"Ummm, good point. It's just that I've never seen a Coke bottle in a different language. I'll have to take it home as a souvenir."

Ninan shook his head, as if it was going to take awhile to get used to these crazy foreign ideas.

They were back on the main road and speeding along with all the other traffic. Ninan seemed to have no problem eating, drinking, and keeping up with all of the cars who seemed to not worry about things like signaling for lane changes. Ninan might fail a driver's test in Canada, but he was an awesome driver.

Thinking how far apart everything was in Toronto, Thomas expected at least a half hour drive, but it was only ten minutes later that Ninan was looking for a parking spot.

After finding a spot, they still had to walk a bit.

The grounds around the National Museum were spacious and grassy with enough statues and ornaments to keep the eyes busy.

"Look!" said Thomas, pointing. "It's like a castle!" One of the buildings had a facade that looked like an ancient fairytale castle.

"That's the entrance," said Ninan. He glanced at his watch. "We're a bit early, but that's good."

It cost 150 Syrian pounds to get inside, but Ninan assured Thomas that that was only about three dollars.

A guard directed them to the special exhibit.

A big sign at the entrance of the room said, "The Arab Revolt".

"Idd Thomma should be here," said Ninan as they entered the spacious room. "This is what he's always talking about. Look over there..." He pointed to a life-size photograph. "That's the famous Faisal."

Thomas turned to look at the man wearing a traditional Arab outfit – white silk robes with a keffiyeh held in place by a gold agal and the curved dagger at stomach level. He had a slim face, elegant hands, and piercing dark eyes. Young. Maybe around thirty, at the most.

“So, who was he?”

“Well, as Idd Thomma has told me a thousand times, he was one of the sons of the Sherif of Mecca. You know what that is, yes?”

Thomas shook his head.

“You have led a sheltered life, cousin,” said Ninan, shaking his head. “You know, the Sherif of Mecca is the guardian of Mecca. That was all way back when the Hijaz wasn’t part of Saudi Arabia.”

Thomas’s blank face caused Ninan to roll his eyes.

“You do know that there was a time when Arabia was not Saudi Arabia, yes?”

“Uh, like five hundred years ago?”

“More like a hundred years ago. So Faisal is an Emir, a prince, of the Hijaz. And the Turks ruled the Middle East. They were Muslim, but a lot of the Arabs were angry when they started to make everyone speak Turkish. They even started killing the Arab nationalists and that’s when Faisal joined in. There is a story of how he heard of the number of Arab leaders who had been killed and he tore off his keffiyeh and threw it on the ground and screamed, death is sweet, O Arabs!”

Thomas looked at the graceful and dignified man in the picture.

“What does that mean, exactly?” he asked.

“It is a call to fight. It is sweeter to die than live under tyranny.”

“Well, I don’t see too many Turks around, so I take it the Arabs won?”

Ninan nodded.

“This was around the time of World War I. So, Turkey joins the war on the side of Germany and suddenly England thinks that an Arab Revolt would be a good idea. So England supplies the Arabs with weapons and sends some men to come as advisors...”

Ninan’s story was interrupted by someone coming into the room.

It was a young woman. Her hair was long, her eyes round and dark. She was dressed Western-style in jeans and a black sweater.

Could she be the one that was in trouble?

Ninan looked at Thomas knowingly. The girl glanced at them as she walked over to one of glass cases to examine the “flag of the Arab Revolt” – black, white and green with a red triangle on the left side. The glass case was devoted to showing how many other Arab flags had been modeled after the flag of Arab Liberation, including the Iraqi flag, the Jordanian flag and the Palestinian flag.

“Ahfwan,” said Ninan, walking over to the young woman. “Ahfwan yiia’anisa.” Excuse me, miss. He and the young woman had a rapid exchange in Arabic that ended with Ninan heading back to Thomas.

“She is not the one,” he said, embarrassed. “It is too early anyhow.”

As long as the girl was in the room, he pretended to stare at a glass case all about “The Great Betrayal.”

In order to cover up for the embarrassment, Thomas asked Ninan what the Great Betrayal was.

“Oh, well, how it goes is this...Faisal rode into Damascus a hero. The crowds were all excited. It is Idd Thomma’s favourite story because his Ab was there, riding along with Faisal. I think there were 1,500 Arabs on horses riding behind Faisal. And the army of the Arab Revolt had already arrived in Damascus a few days earlier. So it

was quite the exciting times. The Turkish flag got ripped down and the Arab flag got run up and the people celebrated.”

“But what’s the betrayal?”

“Well, General Allenby was the British commander and right away, he called Faisal and they met at some hotel and General Allenby told him that the French had interests in Syria. And I cannot really remember it all, but Idd Thomma has it all memorized. Something along the lines of there was an Arab counsel and they made Faisal king of Syria. Then the European powers met at some place called San Remo and they divided up Syria. The French got this part of Syria and the Lebanon. The British got Palestine and Trans-Jordan and Iraq. They broke it all up, you see. Look, it is all here.” Ninan pointed to a map that showed how England and France had divided up the Middle East after World War I.

Until the girl left the room, Thomas concentrated on an article all about some peace conference at Versailles, the palace in Paris. Faisal had attended but none of the European powers had given the Arabs the independence they had fought for. Frustrated, Faisal had driven by and thrown cushions at the headquarters of the British delegates. That made Thomas laugh and he pointed it out to Ninan.

By this time, the girl had left so Ninan had cheered up.

Come on,” he grabbed Thomas’s hand and pulled him over to an exhibit.

Thomas’s father had warned him that in Arab countries, it was normal to hold hands with a man so don’t feel uncomfortable if it happens. It still took some getting used to though.

“This is good stuff,” he said, as they looked down at a glass case full of daggers, swords, and old rifles.

Then they looked at blown-up photos that were covering the walls. There were a lot of men on camels, men on horses. One photo showed men in front of a well.

“It says here that the Turkish soldiers would throw dead camels into the wells in order to contaminate the water,” said Thomas. Thankfully, the captions underneath the photos were in Arabic, English and French.

“Yes,” said Ninan. “They would do the same at the oases. Sometimes the men would just have to drink it anyhow.”

Thomas made a face.

“I wouldn’t have,” he said.

“Yes, you would have,” said Ninan. “I am not a Bedouin but I know that if you live in the desert and the wells and oases are far apart, then you just have to drink the water that is available. Either that or die of thirst.”

“But wouldn’t you die of poisoning if you drank contaminated water?” asked Thomas.

Ninan shrugged.

“Maybe. Or maybe just get a bellyache.”

“Who’s that guy?” asked Thomas, pointing to a picture of a man in a traditional Arab outfit, except that he didn’t look Arab. He had a long, pale face. He was crouched down and looking directly into the camera.

“You do not know?” Ninan was incredulous.

This was starting to become a theme. Everyone shocked at how little he knew.

Before Ninan could enlighten him, a large group of children entered the room, escorted by two ladies.

“Must be from a madrasa, school,” said Ninan.

Thomas glanced at his watch and then looked again.

It was exactly one o’clock!

“This could be it!” he said to Ninan. “It’s one o’clock!”

“But a child?” said Ninan.

“Why not?” asked Thomas. “In fact, it makes sense. A kid could need help. Who knows what’s going on...”

“You could be right,” said Ninan. “We will see if anyone tries to get our attention.”

The children were somewhere between the age of ten and twelve. Most of them looked bored. They’d probably already done up a lot of the museum. A few of the boys were horsing around, deliberately bumping into one another, and ineffectually being hushed by the teachers.

A tour guide was leading them and they began the slow round of touring all the glass cases. When one of the boys rushed over to look at the swords, he was hurried back by a teacher to look at the first case that contained the flag.

“Too bad,” said Ninan. In order to appear like normal museum visitors, they were examining a glass case that contained some sort of explosives. “They will make it boring for the children, but it is really quite interesting.”

“I thought you were tired of it all,” said Thomas.

Ninan shrugged.

“Well, tired of hearing Idd Thomma talk about it. But look at this.”

Thomas looked down at the explosives.

“See, these were used to blow up the railway lines. The Turks relied on the railway lines to transport troops and supplies. But a lot of the Arabs and their English advisors went out and blew up the railway lines. It was dangerous work but exciting too. They would gallop in, set the explosives, brush the sand clear of tracks, and then hide while they waited. Then they would detonate the explosive when the train went by.”

“Then what?” This was cool stuff.

“Then, if there were a lot of Turkish troops they would have a battle. And the Arabs would win. And then they would loot the train.”

“That kind of sounds familiar,” said Thomas. “I think I’ve seen that in a movie. or something.”

“One train was loaded with supplies for the Turkish garrison in Medina. The Arabs had it under siege so supplies were important. It had lots of food and drinks and cigarettes for the soldiers. So it was great for the Arabs to keep it from getting through to Medina.”

Thomas nodded.

“But Faisal,” continued Ninan, “was so addicted to smoking that he felt sorry for the Turkish soldiers not having their cigarettes. So he had some mules loaded up with cigarettes and sent to the soldiers in Medina.”

“Even though they were the enemy?”

Ninan laughed.

“Yes, that was what made Faisal such a good leader. He did things like that. And I think his greatest strength was that he brought all the Arab leaders together so that they could fight under one flag.”

Thomas glanced at the children who were now in front of the wall of photographs. It would be awhile before they made it to the explosives.

"What's the big deal with that?" he asked. "I thought the Arabs didn't like the Turks."

"They did not but you do not know much about Arabs, do you?"

Thomas sighed.

"Yes," he said. "I believe that you've made that point before."

"Sorry," said Ninan. "I do not know much about Kanadaa, Canada, either. The thing with the Arabs was that they were always fighting each other. By tribes, you know. There were camel raids and blood feuds and Faisal was the only one who could sit them all down in his tent and work out all the differences. Sometimes he would settle debts with his own money. And he would punish the wrong doers so that a blood feud would not break out. And that is how he held them all together so that they could fight as one."

"He was a peacemaker among the Arabs."

"Exactly," said Ninan, punching him in the arm in approval. "And he always put Arabs first. Whether they were Muslim or Christian. It did not matter with him. Always Arabs first. That is why Idd Thomma likes him even though he was a Muslim, not a Christian. And, of course, he had many Christian friends, that most famous one, of course, ..."

At that moment, one of the boys from the class flew over to Thomas and grabbed him by the shirt.

Thomas was so startled, he nearly lost his balance.

"Musaa'adi! Musaa'adi!" cried the boy. "Help me, sir! Help me, sir!"

Thomas grabbed the boy to keep them both from falling.

An irate teacher came over to escort the boy back to the group and the boy grinned and bowed as his classmates clapped and cheered.

Ninan and Thomas looked at each other.

"Could it be?" asked Ninan.

"I dunno," said Thomas. "He doesn't look too upset to me."

The boy was receiving slaps on the back for his stunt. And it was true. He didn't seem upset and he wasn't even looking back at Thomas and Ninan.

After the school children left, the room was quiet.

Ninan glaced at his watch.

"1:28," he said. "I think the person might not be able to come."

"That's awful," said Thomas. "I wonder what happened?"

"Maybe it is a joke, like Idd Thomma said."

"Do you think so?"

"No," said Ninan. "I think it's real."

But even though they stayed another fifteen minutes, no one approached them.

"Well," said Ninan. "I do not have to have you back til five. So would you like me to take you around Damascus a bit?"

"Sure."

"Well, just to complete our tour of things related to the Arab Revolt, how about I show you Martyr's Square?" said Ninan, as they headed back out of the museum into the bright sunlight.

"Sure," said Thomas. "Why's it called Martyr's Square?"

The grounds of the Museum were full of tourists -- Westerners speaking English, French and German; Damascenes standing around talking Arabic, women dressed head-to-toe in black leading small children; women dressed in the Western style leading small children; it was like the streets, crowded with so much variety.

"A lot of Arab nationalists were martyred there in 1916. That is what got the Arab Revolt going. Faisal was furious and agreed that it was time to revolt against the Turks. See, up to that point, his father and his brother, Abdullah, were all for revolt but Faisal wanted to wait a bit. He was worried that they would just throw off Turkish rule and then have the French move in."

"Isn't that what happened?"

Ninan nodded.

"But in any case, it is what got Faisal into the revolt and he was really the leader of it once it got going."

By this time they were at the car.

Ninan unlocked the doors and the first thing they did after getting in was unroll the windows.

"What's that smell?" asked Thomas as they were driving.

"Probably the river." Ninan waved a hand in a western direction.

If possible, the buildings seemed to get even more congested. Ninan provided an explanation.



"Martyr's Square is pretty much the centre of the new part of Dimashq," said Ninan.

They were passing hotels and stores of all kinds – everything from bookstores to butcher shops.

It was a short drive to Martyr's Square.

"Here it is," said Ninan, pointing. "It's kind of hard to get out and look around so I'll just drive around it. You can get the best baklava in the world over there," he said pointing to a small outdoor cafe. "We will have to go there sometime."

Thomas got a glimpse of fountains and bridges that crossed over the river. Traffic continually circled around it. Ninan passed by it twice to let Thomas get a better look.

"Idd Thomma has a nice old photo of it in his bedroom," said Ninan. "You should ask him if you can look at it. It looked like it was a real place to walk around when the picture was taken."

"We will go up Rami Street," said Ninan, making a turn. "Then up An-Naser. That will take us to the Hedjaz Station. It's something to see."

Ninan switched on the radio and they listened to the Arabic singing for the short trip.

When they had found a parking spot and were walking again, Ninan explained the importance of the Hedjaz Station.

"The Turks built it in the early twentieth century. That was when a lot of people began taking the train to the Hijaz, for the pilgrimage to Mecca...Ah! Hon! Here it is!"

Thomas didn't know much about architecture, but he had to agree that the station was impressive, grand with its columns and arched openings.

"Come on!" said Ninan. "There's an old Ottoman car that's been turned into a bar. It has a lot of atmosphere."

Thomas didn't ask about the legal drinking age in Syria.

Ninan led Thomas to the main platform.

There were a few other old carriages on the grass, looking as if they had just been put out to pasture and forgotten.

They entered the restored carriage and found themselves in a different time and place. For one thing, it was quiet. The décor was elegant.

"This place goes back to the days when Faisal was king," said Ninan, taking a seat at a small table with plush chairs. "Two Baradas," he ordered when a man came to the table to take their order. "It's our local beer," he explained to Thomas. "And it's cheap."

The heat had left Thomas feeling thirsty and the beer was refreshing.

Thomas looked around.

"It *does* have atmosphere," he agreed. "Makes me think of some spy story, you know, the Orient Express, or something."

Ninan nodded.

"Yes," he said. "History is interesting. I guess I should not make so much fun of Idd Thomma. I wonder sometimes what it would have been like to have been in the Arab Revolt, riding a camel behind Emir Faisal and waving a sword or shooting a rifle. I know it was hard being out in the heat of the desert with no air-conditioning and the Turks trying to kill you, but when it was all over, the stories you could tell..."

Ninan realized what he was saying and both young men burst out laughing.

"Except that everyone would get tired of hearing them and start to talk about me behind my back!" he concluded.

“But Idd Thomma obviously liked hearing his dad’s stories,” said Thomas, taking a sip of his beer.

Ninan nodded.

“He was the youngest son. I think he got to spend the most time with his Ab. His mom died when he was young so when all his other brothers and sisters moved out, he was left alone with his father.”

“I never thought of him as a little boy,” said Thomas, staring at the bar without seeing it. “I think I don’t ask my dad enough questions about his life before he came to Canada.”

“So, you’ll have a lot of catching up to do when you get home!”

Thomas nodded.

After their beers, Ninan suggested that they drive past the Damascus University where he was a student.

They drove back down the streets that they had come, passing once again the Museum and continuing on until they came to another traffic-congested square.

“This one’s called Al-Umawyeen Square,” said Ninan as they made their way along the outside of the roundabout. “If it has any connection with the Arab Revolt, Idd Thomma has never mentioned it to me.”

Ninan took him on a driving tour of the campus.

“It’s our largest, oldest university in Syria,” said Ninan. “I have a class in there.” He pointed to a white stone building with a faded red roof, framed by palm trees. “They have degrees in literature, medicine, law, science, dentistry, everything you can imagine. And the science is all taught in Arabic.” He gave his cousin a push in the ribs even though he was driving. “You should come here and learn Arabic.”

“Yeah,” said Thomas sarcastically. “I think it’s hard enough learning things in English.”

He looked out the window at the students milling around on the sidewalks, talking, walking, not much different from students back home except that some of the girls were wearing the hijab. The architecture was much more diverse than that of the University of Toronto. He saw a pink building with white columns, an orange and brown brick building, low-rise modern buildings and high-rise student dormitories.

“Come,” said Ninan, as he parked the car in a lot shaded by palm trees. “I must show you the Faculty of Architecture.”

They headed down a path to one of the modern-looking buildings.

“What do you think?” asked Ninan as they passed through the doorway into a well-lit atrium.

Thomas looked up.

The whole ceiling was a skylight and yellow bridges enabled people to cross over from one side of the building to the other. All of the rooms were closed in with glass rather than walls, creating a feeling of openness.

“It’s pretty cool,” said Thomas. “I like it.”

“Me too,” said Ninan. “I have a lot of classes here.”

Ninan took him down to the basement level which still felt like it was full of light thanks to the yellow and green interior. They ran into some friends of Ninan and he introduced them to Thomas. There was some talk about an upcoming test and a project to design a mosque or church.



When they left the Faculty of Architecture, Ninan announced that it was 4:00 and that they'd have to be getting back soon. But he took such a roundabout route, still showing Thomas all the sights that the Damascus University offered that they didn't get back to 'Ammi Mariam's apartment until 5:00.

They took the stairs two at a time.

'Ammi Mariam's apartment was packed with people and Thomas felt himself being hugged and kissed and introduced to so many people that his head was spinning. To make matters worse, many people were talking in Arabic and he had no idea what they were saying.

Ninan laughed at his discomfiture.

"Come on!" he said, grabbing his arm and leading him to a table where there was pita bread and hummus and tabbouleh, as well as bowls of nuts and dried fruits. "Have some sherbet." He poured a drink from a pitcher into a glass cup.

"This is different," said Thomas sipping it. It was like a fruity frozen soft drink.

"No sherbet in Canada, I take it," said Ninan, pouring himself a glass.

Thomas looked around the room. His relatives sure knew how to have a good time. Many of them were middle-aged, but they were lively, talking rapidly and enjoying each other's company.

"Let me introduce you to some of our cousins," said Ninan, grabbing his hand and dragging him over to a corner where two young men and a woman were talking. "This is Dawud, Butrus, and Saara."

This time, Thomas didn't shake their hands so firmly.

"So, you are from Kanadaa," said Dawud. "I would like to go there."

"It's OK," said Thomas. "I like it here too. Everybody's really friendly."

Dawud, Butrus, and Saara all seemed pleased with his assessment. Dawud was about 20, like Ninan. Butrus looked about 16. Saara seemed to be the oldest, maybe 21. As the evening progressed, he found out that Butrus and Saara were brother and sister. They asked a lot of questions about Canada but they also talked among themselves. Soccer was a popular sport and something that they all enjoyed following on TV. Saara liked to read and asked him about his favourite books. Dawud was busy at school so he and Ninan talked all about their studies. Butrus was still in high school, one run by French Christians, so he was also fluent in French. He liked cycling and going to movies.

At dinner, 'Ammi Mariam seated him between his two uncles who were his father's brothers. It was cool to hear stories about his dad when he was a kid. It was stuff his dad had never told him.

Idd Thomma was right to anticipate a feast. Thomas ate til he was stuffed. He never knew he liked eggplant, but he ate two servings of his aunt's baked eggplant, not to mention the lamb, the rice, all the salads, the olives, the bread and the dips for it.

The evening winded down with coffee and almond cookies and cheesecake.

"Call me if you hear anything else," said Ninan, with a knowing look, as everyone started saying their good-byes and heading out.

"Yep," said Thomas. "I will."

'Ammi Mariam didn't want any help in the kitchen, so Thomas went straight to bed. It had been a long day.

## WEDNESDAY ~ STRAIGHT STREET

“Sorry I could not meet you. I am a prisoner.” Then more Arabic writing. The note had been pushed under the door.

Wow! This was serious!

Idd Thomma and ‘Ammi Mariam were both still in their bedrooms. Thomas took the note back to his bedroom and decided to call Ninan after breakfast.

Idd Thomma came out into the living room a few minutes later.

“Well, we are on our own for breakfast” he said to Thomas, rubbing his hands together. “‘Ammi Mariam is resting this morning. So I will make you my famous hummus for breakfast.” He headed for the kitchen.

“Hummus for breakfast?” said Thomas.

“Sure, why not?”

“Because...” He couldn’t really think of a reason not to have hummus for breakfast except that he never did.

“Come,” said Idd Thomma, waving a hand towards him. “I will share my secret recipe with you. It is part of your heritage, after all.”

Some chickpeas were soaking in water on the counter. Idd Thomma got them cooking in a pot over the stove.

Then he had Thomas chopping garlic while he filled a food processor with spices.

“Cumin,” he said, shaking a generous amount in. “Chili pepper, salt, black pepper...”

Lemon juice, olive oil and sesame paste were also added. Then he announced that the chick peas had to simmer for an hour.

“So, we will go out and buy our daily bread.”

Idd Thomma threw a sweater on, despite the heat that was already begin to settle in the air, and they headed down the stairs out into the street. It was a short walk to a small bakery that was, despite the early hour, doing a bustling business.

Idd Thomma purchased six pitas. The Arabic bread was bigger than the type found in North American supermarkets.

“So, you buy your bread in the morning too?” he asked Thomas on their way back.

“No,” said Thomas. “We buy loaves of bread in the supermarket and they just sit on the counter until we’re done.”

Idd Thomma shook his head.

“Fresh bread, Thomma,” he said. “Our messiah knew about fresh bread. That’s why he said, give us today our daily bread.”

Thomas had never thought about that before.

“I guess you’re right,” he said.

When they got back, Thomas asked if he could call Ninan.

“Of course,” said Idd Thomma. “Get that sleepy-head out of bed.”

Thomas laughed. Somehow it was even funnier the second time around.

While Idd Thomma went into the kitchen to check on the chickpeas, Thomas called Ninan.

“Wow!” said Ninan. “That is exciting! Not that someone is in trouble, but that it is real! I hope we can help them!”

“Well, the tricky thing is the Arabic. I don’t know what it says.”

“I will be over right away,” promised Ninan. “I can read it and then go to school. We will be able to plan once we know what it says.”

Ninan arrived just as Idd Thomma announced that his hummus was done.

“See,” said Idd Thomma beaming as Thomas opened the door. “My hummus is famous. People come from far away to it!”

Ninan gave Thomas a grin.

They all sat around the small kitchen table and after Idd Thomma asked a blessing they broke bread and dipped it in the hummus.

Thomas was so hungry at this point that he ate with gusto. Idd Thomma was pleased.

“See, chickpeas for breakfast!” he announced.

“Yes,” agreed Thomas. “It’s not bad.”

“Let me guess,” said Ninan. “You don’t eat hummus for breakfast in Canada?”

“That’s right,” said Thomas. “Eggs, toast, potatoes, cereal, pancakes, waffles, oatmeal, but never hummus.”

“That’s a lot of food!”

Thomas burst out laughing.

“Not all in one meal! Sometimes eggs and toast. Sometimes cereal. Sometimes pancakes.”

“Ahhh,” said Ninan, enlightened. He glanced at his watch and hurried up his eating. “I have got to go soon.”

Right after breakfast, they hurried to Thomas’s room and Ninan translated the Arabic portion of the message.

“Go to the maktaba by Bab Touma,” Ninan looked up. “A bookstore by the Gate of Thomas. That is the Christian quarter in the Old City.”

“You mean I’ve got a gate named after me?” said Thomas grinning.

“Yes, I guess you do. You and Idd Thomma.”

“It doesn’t give a time.”

“That is good,” said Ninan, looking at his watch again. “Because I have to go. I can be back at three, though. And we can go then.”

“Sounds good.” Thomas saw his cousin to the door and then went back to join Idd Thomma in the kitchen. Idd Thomma didn’t mind help in the kitchen so Thomas ended up doing the breakfast dishes while his grandfather put the leftover hummus in the refrigerator and wrapped up the bread.

“Today, I will tell you a story,” said Idd Thomma when they had returned to the living room.

Now he was going to hear all about the Arab Revolt. Wouldn’t Idd Thomma be surprised to learn that he already knew a lot about it!

“There was a man who hated Christians,” said Idd Thomma, settling down into his chair. “And with the help of the Jews in Jerusalem, he threw as many of them as he could into prison. When that was done, he wanted to go to Damascus to do the same thing there.”

Thomas was surprised.

“Are you talking about Paul?” he asked.

Idd Thomma nodded.

“Then you know the story?” he asked.

“Well, kind of. He was on his way to Damascus and God blinded him and asked him why he was persecuting him.”

“Good,” nodded Idd Thomma. “Then what?”

“Then he was brought into the city and taken somewhere...”

“To a street called Straight,” said Idd Thomma.

“Yeah, that’s right. And some guy named Annanias got a message from God to go to him and then he could see again...”

“Sounds like you have the general idea. So, I will tell you what we will do today.” His grandfather stood up. “We will visit Straight Street.”

“You mean it’s still here?” said Thomas standing up too.

“Yes, it runs right through the Old City. Now come. No time to waste.” His grandfather was heading for the door.

They walked the same route they had taken to the bakery that morning but then they kept going. They turned down a short quiet street that took them out to a busier road. Idd Thomma stopped at a bus stop.

Idd Thomma seemed to be focusing all of his energies on waiting for the bus, so Thomas just people-watched for the ten minutes that it took for the blue and white bus to come.

Everything about the bus was Arabic, the route number, the advertising on it, and the occupants. Clearly buses were for the locals. Tourists probably took taxis.

Idd Thomma paid their fare and Thomas let his grandfather have the only seat remaining on the bus. It turned out to be a short distance, which was just as well, because either the bus didn’t have air-conditioning or else it was broken. The amazing thing was how despite the heat, so many people wore long sleeves and pants, or in the case of women, long skirts. He had brought some shorts with him but was glad that he’d put on jeans that morning instead.

“Here!” said Idd Thomma, leaping up and grabbing his grandson’s arm. He hurried him off the bus as it stopped.

They had arrived at the Old City. It was surrounded by old walls.

“That is the Citadel,” said Idd Thomma, pointing to a massive solid structure to their left that blended with the walls. “And this is Bab al-Nasr.” Idd Thomma pointed to the gate that they would enter the old city through.

His grandfather was not a tour guide. He simply hustled his grandson through the busy streets where vendors sold fruits and vegetables, sandals, brass coffee pots, spices, dolls, carpets, swords, gold jewelry, meat, nuts, dates, olives, confectioneries, scarves, dresses, suits, and where the housewives of Damascus seemed to be out buying it all. There were also a lot tourists, kind of wandering aimlessly, snapping photos and being encouraged by the shop-keepers to visit their shops.

But Idd Thomma didn’t slow down until they came to a particular spot.

“Straight Street,” he announced.

Thomas peered down the busy road.

“It’s not exactly straight,” he said.

“It’s straighter than some,” said Idd Thomma. Now he was moving more leisurely, stopping to inspect some olives, smiling a greeting to a man selling sandals. “Come, we will have coffee.” He wandered into a tiny coffee-shop full of older men.



They took two plastic patio chairs and soon a small pot of coffee and two brass cups were brought to their table.

Idd Thomma greeted many of the patrons, so it was obvious that he came here often.

“Many are Nasara,” he explained to Thomas.

There were many Arabic comments exchanged and the men laughed a lot. Over the course of several coffees, Idd Thomma introduced him to a lot of the men. Many of them asked about Canada, how long he was staying in Syria and what he thought of his trip so far.

“I like it,” he said when asked the last question. “It’s different, but it’s cool.”

The men looked at each other and one of them simulated shivering. They seemed puzzled.

“Is it more hot than this in Canada?” asked one of them.

Thomas didn’t get it at first, but then he realized what he’d said.

“No, I don’t mean cool as in cold, I mean it’s cool as in...” he couldn’t think of a better word. “As in, I like it.” Well, he’d already said that but it was the best he could do.

The men seemed satisfied with the explanation although one of them continued to look at him strangely.

“Well, that is it,” said Idd Thomma, after his third coffee, standing up.

There was no further discussion from Idd Thomma about Paul or Annanias except for a brief mention that there were chapels dedicated to both men in the Old City. Instead, Idd Thomma selected some dates and oranges and apricots from a fruit market so that they could have a snack.

“Mish-mish,” said Idd Thomma, handing Thomma an apricot. “There, now you know some Arabic.”

“Mish-mish,” repeated Thomas.

They meandered along Straight Street and the further they went, the quieter it got. There were a lot of antique stores. His mother would have loved it. He’d have to make a point of coming back sometime to do some present shopping, but for now, he was getting edgy. It was nearly two o’clock and he had to back for three to meet Ninan.

But he didn’t have to worry. As soon as they had walked the length of Straight Street, they were climbing aboard another blue and white bus and heading back to the New City.

Ninan was parking in front of ‘Ammi Mariam’s apartment just as Idd Thomma and Thomas were arriving back.

“Marhaban!” called out Nina. “Can I take him, Idd Thomma?”

Idd Thomma waved his permission.

“Thanks Idd Thomma!” called out Thomas, as he climbed into Ninan’s car. “I had a good time.”

Idd Thomma beamed before heading into the apartment.

“Where did you go?” asked Ninan, pulling out into the road.

“Straight Street.”

“Oh, that’s close to where we are going,” said Ninan. “What did you do?”

“Drink coffee.”

Ninan laughed.

“Idd Thomma’s favourite coffee house.”

Thomas recognized the old city but Ninan parked by a different gate.

“Welcome to your gate!” Ninan said as they passed through the creamy white gate into a busy neighbourhood. “Now, let us find the nearest bookstore.”

There was nothing immediately in the vicinity so Ninan asked an older man.

The man nodded, said something and pointed.

“The nearest one is on Shaari Al Melak Faysal,” said Ninan, turning down a quieter road. “Down here.”

“Faysal? Isn’t he...?”

“Yes!” said Ninan, suddenly realizing. “King Faisal Street!”

“He gets a street named after him?”

“Well, he was the last king of Syria. He certainly deserves that much.”

When they turned onto King Faisal Street, the bookstore was right there.

Though the lighting was dim, the proprietor was friendly. The walls were stacked high with books, many of them new, but most of them second-hand. Thomas was surprised to see a lot in English and many of them with a Christian theme.

“What should we do now?” asked Thomas.

Ninan shrugged. He had picked up a book and was casually browsing through it.

“I guess we can just look around and maybe figure out what to do.”

Thomas focused his attention on the English books. There were quite a few about history, some classics like Shakespeare, and a few works of lighter fiction. Though the proprietor was occasionally glancing their way, nothing of significance seemed to be happening. Thomas wondered whether his father would like an Arabic book as a present.

“What’s this?” he asked, holding up a book with Arabic writing.

“Fix-it Yourself Manual,” said Ninan, reading the plain cover.

Sure enough, when Thomas flipped through it, it was full of pictures of ovens, washing machines, dryers, faucets and toilets. He put it back.

Ninan had picked out an Arabic book.

“What is it?” asked Thomas.

“Ummayad Architecture in Damascus,” said Ninan.

“Oh, school,” said Thomas. “I like spy thrillers. Do you think they have anything?”

A casual look around didn’t result in any spy thrillers so they went up to the counter with Ninan’s book.

“I think you might be the two young men I was told to look out for,” said the proprietor, a middle-aged man wearing glasses, a white shirt and khaki pants.

Thomas and Ninan looked at each other excitedly.

“We are!” said Ninan.

“We got a note to come here,” added Thomas.

“Then this is for you,” said the man, reaching under the counter and handing Thomas a book. Thomas started to pull out his wallet but the man waved it away. “It’s already been paid for,” he explained.

“Do you remember who gave it to you?”

The man shook his head and smiled.

“Can’t say. Can’t say.”

“Wow!” said Thomas, as they headed back out into the heat, each holding their books. “This is so real! I mean, someone’s serious about needing help!”

“What is the book?” asked Ninan, nodding towards it.

“Seven Pillars of Wisdom,” said Thomas reading the cover. “Must be some philosophy thing.” He started flipping through it.

“Actually, it is history,” said Ninan.

Thomas barely heard him.

“Look!” he said, holding out the book so Ninan could see inside. “Some of the letters are circled! It’s another message!”

Ninan's eyes widened as he nodded.

“We will need paper and a pen. Let us go back to ‘Ammi Mariam’s. We will do it in your room.”

They hurried back to the car and half an hour later, they were dashing up the stairs and into the apartment.

Idd Thomma was in his chair reading a newspaper.

‘Ammi Mariam was drinking tea and got up to greet them both with a kiss.

“We have got some work to do,” said Ninan. “We will just be in Thomas’s room.”

Idd Thomma nodded from behind his paper.

“Take some cookies,” said ‘Ammi Mariam, handing Thomas a plate of biscuits.

“Thanks ‘Ammi Mariam,” he said.

“I’ll make some tea and bring it in,” she said, heading into the kitchen.

Thomas thought it would be rude to shut the bedroom door so he left it ajar.

“Uhhh, I didn’t exactly pack a notebook and pen in my suitcase,” he said.

“I’ll ask Idd Thomma.” Ninan, headed back out into the living room. He returned a few minutes later carrying a tray with a teapot, two mugs, and a notebook and pen.

Ninan poured their tea while Thomas wrote down the first letter.

“M,” he said.

Ninan nodded as he took a sip of tea.

“A.”

“I.”

“S.”

Thomas put down the book and rubbed his eyes. It was a lot of work looking for the circled letters. Ninan handed him a cup of sugary tea and he took a few tentative sips.

“OK,” he said, picking up the book again.

“A.”

“L.”

“U.”

“N.”

“P.”

He took another break and another few sips of tea.

“A.”

“S.”

“S.”

Y.”



He had to eat a few cookies to keep up his strength. Ninan was on his second cup of tea and about his tenth cookie.

“A.”

“U.”

“M.”

“I.”

“L.”

He was getting near the end of the book so hopefully the message was almost complete.

“K.”

“H.”

“A.”

M.”

“I.”

“S.”

That seemed to be it. He strained his eyes trying to find any more letters.

“MAISALUNPASSYAUMILKHAMIS,” he read out loud. “Does that mean anything to you?”

Ninan studied the message thoughtfully and took another sip of tea.

“Maisalun Pass Yaum Il Khamis,” he said. “Maisalun Pass is about 12 miles from here. On the way to Beirut. Yaum il Khamis is Thursday. Tomorrow!” He looked up at Thomas. “We have to go there tomorrow!”

“Why do you think we have to go to Maisalun Pass?” asked Thomas.

Ninan shook his head.

“I do not know. It is the place of a famous battle. All I know is that Yusuf al-Azmah died there. He is a famous martyr because he fought the French when they tried to take over Damascus. That was the time when King Faisal had to leave Syria.”

“More King Faisal stuff,” said Thomas.

Ninan shrugged.

“There is a lot of history in Damascus. You cannot go anywhere without it being some place that something has happened at. Damascus is the longest inhabited city.”

“In the world?”

Ninan nodded.

“They cannot do archaeological digs because so much just gets built on top of things. So...about this...” Ninan waved his hand towards the message. “I can pick you up after my classes tomorrow. I have the same classes as Tuesday so I can be here before lunch. That will give us all afternoon.”

“Sounds good. But I can’t help but wonder how somebody who’s a prisoner gets out so much. I mean, this sounds like you need a car to get to.”

Ninan shook his head.

“There are plenty of buses that run that route because it goes to Beirut. And of course, a taxi is not too expensive. I think what happens is, the person knows that they are going there, so they leave us a message. It might be a young woman living in purdah...”

“Purdah?”

“That is when a woman is veiled and cannot go anywhere unless she has a male relative. Perhaps the woman knows that her father or brother is going and that she will be able to go with him. That is what happened at the bookstore, I’m sure. The bookstore owner does not want to get into trouble for helping a woman. It might anger her father and brothers.”

“That sounds like a good theory,” said Thomas.

“Come,” said Ninan, picking up the tray, now with empty cups and plate. “Let’s visit with ‘Ammi Mariam and Idd Thomma. I’ve been taking you around so much they have not seen much of you.”

They returned to the living room.

“You will stay for dinner?” asked ‘Ammi Mariam to Ninan.

“I wish I could ‘Ammi,” he said, putting the tray down on the coffee table and sitting down on one of the of the couches. “But I have a test to study for tonight.”

“School going well?” asked Idd Thomma from behind his paper.

“Yes, Idd Thomma. “Very well. Soon I will be designing a great cathedral for Syria.” Ninan’s eyes sparkled.

“Good,” said Idd Thomma. “You design the cathedral. But how shall we fill it with Allah-fearing Christians instead of tourists?”

“Allah?” said Thomas, puzzled. “Isn’t he the Muslim’s God?”

For this, Idd Thomma put down his newspaper.

“Allah is Arabic for God. Since most Arabs are Muslim, he is the God of the Muslims. But he is also the God of the Christians.”

“Oh, I see,” said Thomas. “It’s the word for God.”

Idd Thomma nodded.

“Well, that is it for me,” said Ninan, standing up. “I must get home to my studies. I will see you tomorrow, Thomas.”

Thomas nodded.

‘Ammi Mariam walked Ninan to the door and then headed towards the kitchen. Soon there were delicious smells coming from the kitchen.

Once again, Idd Thomma surprised Thomas. He expected some kind of significant talk about his faith, his Arabic culture, but instead, his grandfather leaning forward, picked up the remote on the coffee table and switched on the small television set.

Many of stations were in Arabic but one station was playing Top Gun. In English! Excited, Thomas leaned forward. But Idd Thomma kept surfing. He settled on a man standing behind a podium, talking in Arabic.

Thomas sighed and leaned back.

He didn’t know why he was so disappointed. He actually had the Top Gun DVD at home and never watched it.

Whatever ‘Ammi Mariam was making was taking awhile so Thomas got up, went to his room, and got the book that the bookseller had given him. It was probably the only English thing in the whole apartment.

He returned to the couch and started to read.

## THURSDAY ~ BATTLE OF MAYSALUM PASS

"I was so bored, I ended up reading a lot of that book," he said to Ninan when they were out in Ninan's car.

Last night's dinner had been some kind of meat inside of grape leaves and had tasted good enough for Thomas to have seconds and then thirds. They'd had their coffee and some pistachio pastries out in the living room where Idd Thomma had turned the TV back on, this time to watch two men talking to each in Arabic at a table. Since 'Ammi Mariam seemed content to do some sewing and occasionally glance at the TV, he had pulled out the book again.

This morning, breakfast had been prepared by 'Ammi Mariam and had consisted of Arab-style bread, cheese and olives, along with some tea. "Chai," she had called it.

After breakfast, Idd Thomma had picked up his Bible, so Thomas had had more time to read.

"It was actually quite interesting," he said to Ninan. They were heading out of the city. "It wasn't philosophy like I first thought. I think it was all about that Arab Revolt everyone's always talking about. It's by some guy named T.E. Lawrence..."

"Yeah, I know him," said Ninan. "Lurens or Aurens, he's sometimes called in Arabic. But you English have a different name for him. You know..." He looked at Thomas.

Thomas looked back at him, like, *go on*.

"The movie? *Lawrence of Arabia*?"

"*Lawrence of Arabia*?" said Thomas incredulously. "You mean he's from the Arab Revolt?"

"Yes," said Ninan. "He was one of Emir Faisal's English advisors."

"Oh," Thomas thought about this.

Actually, it all kind of made sense. That was why he was always blowing up train tracks.

"Remember?" said Ninan. "We saw his picture at the museum?"

Thomas remembered the pale man in the Arab outfit, crouched down and looking directly at the camera.

"Oh, so that's the real guy, eh?" He thought of Peter O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia*. They did look sort of similar."

"Just do not talk to Idd Thomma about that movie," said Ninan. The open road out of the city was quieter but everyone was still speeding. "He says it makes Faisal look like an old tired man. In fact, he was young and quite the warrior."

"I know!" said Thomas, leaning forward in his seat. "He would charge into battle under gunfire, just to prove that it was OK! And then he would fight til he was exhausted and his servants had to carry him off the battlefield."

"Ah, so you did do some reading," said Ninan, grinning as he passed a slower car. "I have never read the book. You will be ahead of me when you are done."

"The funniest story is when the Arabs go into battle against the Turks and then Faisal and his men look over to see one whole tribe just suddenly turn and leave. Since they couldn't fight without that tribe, they ended up having to retreat to one of the towns.

There they were cursing the tribe that had run away, but that night the tribe that had run away showed up outside the town cursing them for running away!”

“I do not know this story,” said Ninan, glancing at Thomas. “What happened next?”

“Well, it turned out that the tribe had only withdrawn because they were tired and wanted to have some coffee.”

Ninan laughed.

“And then when they got back,” continued Thomas, “they found that everyone had left so they were forced to carry on the fight against the Turks alone. They were exhausted and pretty mad at being abandoned.”

Ninan shook his head, still laughing.

“That’s a good one,” he said.



846 Damascus & the Anti-Lebanon. Damascus Damas, prise de Bab Charki.

There were mountains in the distance and the area got more mountainous as they traveled west of Damascus.

“The anti-Lebanon mountains,” explained Ninan. “We could keep going into Lebanon and onto Beirut.”

They passed a small village as they traveled up the mountain. A small sign told them that they had reached Khan Maysalun.

"Well, this is it," said Ninan, pulling over to the side of the road.

"There's nothing here but dirt, rocks, and hydro towers," said Thomas getting out of the car. "This isn't exactly a tourist destination."

"Well, we'll just have to wait a bit," said Ninan, going around to his trunk. He pulled out a couple of orange sodas and handed one to Thomas.

"Good thinking," said Thomas.

"I didn't know how long we'd be here. So I brought some drinks. It can get hot out in these places."

Thomas knew exactly what he meant. A dry hot wind was blowing.

"So what exactly happened here?" he asked.

Ninan took a swig of soda before answering.

"The French got the mandate for Syria after the European powers divided the Middle East up."

"Yeah, so what's up with that?"

"Well, that is the whole question. We Arabs were promised our independence and people like Idd Thomma's father took up their swords and rifles to fight for it. They fought along side of the British, but without them, the British would have had to fight the Turks alone and our Arab Northern Army kept the Turks so busy that the British could just move through Palestine all the way north of Damascus. For one thing, the people in the land were on their side instead of on the side of the Turks. The Arabs lost many lives. It was a blood covenant with Britain and when the time came for us to have our independence, Palestine was given to the Jews and Syria to the French."

"Wow," said Thomas, leaning back against Ninan's car. "That stinks."

"Stinks," Ninan smiled. "I like that. Anyway, the Arabs had already declared Faisal to be king of Greater Syria. You understand that at that time Syria was a lot bigger?"

Thomas shook his head.

"It was Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan."

"So he was, like, king of a big area?"

Ninan nodded.

"But the French told him to get out. At this point, Faisal told his men not to fight anymore, but the Minister of Defense went ahead and organized what was left of the Northern Army as well as some volunteers from Damascus and marched out to meet the French. The French were well-equipped, the Arabs were few and poorly-equipped..." Ninan shrugged and took another swig of orange soda. "This is where they met and this is where it ended. In fact, over there is the tomb of the Minister of Defense, Yusuf al-Azmah." He pointed.

Thomas looked around at the barren landscape and the pass through the mountains. A sudden question occurred to him.

"Did Idd Thomma's father fight here?"

Ninan nodded.

"Did he..." Thomas was afraid to ask, "*die*?"

"No, Hamdulillah! Praise be to God!" Ninan was giving him one of those looks. "If he had, Idd Thomma would have never been born."

Thomas laughed.

"Silly question," he said ruefully.

"No, not really," said Ninan. "It is a lot to take in at once. I've been hearing it all my life from Idd Thomma."

Traffic had been steady. A few people stared at them by the side of the road.

A yellow taxi cab pulled off the side of the road and cruised along until it was a few metres from Ninan's car.

"He probably thinks our car is broken and is offering us a ride back to Damascus," said Ninan, heading in the direction of the taxi, whose driver was climbing out.

Thomas didn't understand the exchange that took place between the driver, an older man with grey hair, and Ninan. But he did see the driver hand Ninan an envelope and then return to his taxi. Before Ninan had even reached Thomas, the taxi had done a U-turn and was heading back in the direction it came.

"This gets more and more mysterious," said Ninan, waving the envelope. "All the man said was this had been given to him to deliver to the two young men at Khan Maisalun."

"Well, that's gotta be us," said Thomas.

"Oh dear," said Ninan, reading the note. "This is serious. I do not know what we are going to do."

"What is it? What does it say?" Thomas was leaning over his cousin's shoulder trying to read the note but it was all in Arabic.

"It says, *I have been taken to Wadi Rum. I do not know when I shall ever see Damascus again. You are my only hope. You are the only ones who know where I am.*"

"Well, I guess we'd better go to this Wadi Rum place. Where is it? Is it close to here? Do you think we should call the police?"

"No," said Ninan, staring into the distance as he thought about it all. "We should not call the police until we know what is going on. But Wadi Rum..."

"Yes?" said Thomas impatiently. "What about it? I think we should go right away."

"We cannot just drive to Wadi Rum. You see, it is in Jordan."

"In Jordan?" Thomas thought about this. "But I mean, we *can* drive there..."

"Of course we can drive there. But what am I going to tell Idd Thomma? That I am just going to take you to Wadi Rum for a few days?"

They leaned against Ninan's car as the midday sun beat down on them. Thomas was thinking so hard that he didn't even notice the sweat running down his back.

"That is it!" said Ninan, snapping his fingers.

"What?!"

"We will take Idd Thomma with us!" said Ninan. "We will tell him that we want to hear all about the Arab Revolt! And you will see, he will have his bag packed in five minutes and be sitting in my car waiting for *us*!"

"What does Wadi Rum have to do with the Arab Revolt?" asked Thomas.

"Oh, it is just one of the places where Aurens rode. They had a camp there I think."

"Lawrence of Arabia?"

Ninan nodded. He was already hopping back into the driver's seat, eager to get back to Damascus and convince his grandfather that they must take an immediate trip to Jordan. Thomas hurried back to the passenger's side.

"But what about school?" asked Thomas, as his cousin made a U-turn and they were speeding back towards Damascus.

"No problem," said Ninan, his eyes on the road. "No classes tomorrow. It is Friday, the Muslim holiday. I will miss Saturday, but there are no classes on Sunday because that is the Christian day off. Maybe I will have to take Monday off too. Mumken. Mumken."

"Mumken?"

"Possible," translated Ninan. "I hope we can convince Idd Thomma to leave right away. Then we can make it to the border of Jordan by tonight."

Thomas didn't know how far away Jordan was, but at the speed that Ninan drove, he had no doubt they could reach any border they wanted to by nightfall.

When they got back to Damascus, the whole scenario of asking Idd Thomma to accompany them to Wadi Rum pretty much played out like Ninan predicated.

"Please Idd Thomma," said Ninan, sitting on the arm of the couch. "We would so much like you to take us to Wadi Rum and to hear all about the Arab Revolt..."

That's all he needed to stay.

Idd Thomma was in his bedroom packing a small bag. Thomas did the same. 'Ammi Mariam hurried to the kitchen to pack them some bread and cheese and olives and dates and drinks.

Then they were back down to Ninan's car with Thomas in the back and Idd Thomma in the passenger's seat.

They stopped off at Ninan's apartment long enough for him to tell his parents he was going on a weekend trip with Idd Thomma and for him to grab a change of clothes, his birth certificate and toothbrush.

It was dizzying how fast they found themselves heading south on a road that would take them to Amman, Jordan. Idd Thomma had taken control of the expedition, announcing that they would stay at the home of a friend of his in Amman.

It surprised Thomas how hospitable the Arabs were. He couldn't imagine just hopping in a car and knowing that he could stay at a friend's house without planning it all out first.

The Syrian countryside was green and pleasant after the smog of Damascus. With the windows rolled down and Ninan keeping up with the speed of traffic, the breeze was enough to keep them cool.

The scenery was hilly with grass and rocks. He saw a lot of shepherds with their sheep and there was even the occasional Bedouin tent and inhabitants further back from the road.



It was going on five o'clock and both Ninan and Thomas were hungry enough to begin digging into 'Ammi Mariam's provisions. Idd Thomma warned them not to eat too much in case his friend served them a big meal.

"But what if we arrive after dinner?" asked Thomas, popping an olive in his mouth.

"He always eats when it's cool, after dark," explained Idd Thomma. "We will be there by then."

The border crossing into Jordan was uneventful. The border guards showed a little more interest in Thomas's passport than they did with Ninan and Idd Thomma's papers, but Idd Thomma was quick to announce to anyone who might be interested that this was his grandson from Canada and that they were going to Amman to spend the night with an old friend and then onto Wadi Rum for some sightseeing. They would follow in the footsteps of the great Arab heroes of the past... Thomas suspected that rather than risk Idd Thomma telling him anymore about their plans and itinerary, the border guard stamped Thomas's passport just to move them along.

Once inside Jordan, the trip to Amman took about half the time that it had taken them to go from Damascus to the border.





Though it was starting to get dark when they arrived, Thomas could see that Amman was smaller than Damascus but it still had its high-rises and was bustling with food vendors and coffee houses. The minarets of the mosques gave the skyline its distinctive Eastern look. Ninan was quick to point out a huge amphitheatre from Roman times that was right in the middle of Amman.

The whole city was spread out on hilly terrain so there was a lot of driving upwards when one reached the residential areas.

Idd Thomma was giving Ninan instructions in Arabic, directing him to his friend's house.

They pulled up in front of a modest white house with more dirt than grass for a front lawn, but pleasant enough with potted plants and patio furniture scattered around. The house contained children because there were a few plastic toys centered around one particular mound of dirt.

Idd Thomma hopped out of the car almost before Ninan had come to a stop. He had run to the front door and started knocking. The man who opened the door was obviously an old and dear friend by the way the two men were greeting each other.

"Come! Come!" Idd Thomma waved to them impatiently. Thomas was still trying to get himself out of the back seat. It was only a two door car.

Ninan grinned at Thomas.

"It will be an interesting night," he said.

No one in the lively household seemed to mind the appearance of three overnight guests. Idd Thomma was greeted with affection and Ninan and Thomas were introduced to several men of all ages, a few older women, and an abundance of children. Thomas found out later that the house contained other women but they were mostly in the kitchen getting the evening meal prepared. What seemed like a feast was being laid out on tables in a small backyard decorated with patio lanterns.

There host was Idd Thomma's friend, Yuhanna, the patriarch of this family. His wife was Rahil. Idd Thomma, Ninan, and Thomas were escorted to what was obviously the place of honour in Yuhanna's backyard, the head of a long table that was rapidly filling up with people.

"We got here just in time, just in time," said Idd Thomma. "Did I not tell you we would get here at the right time?"

Ninan and Thomas nodded as they sat down in their chairs. Yuhanna sat at the head of the table with Idd Thomma at his right hand, Ninan at his left and Thomas beside his grandfather.

Platters of food were coming out of the house but Yuhanna called for silence and said a blessing in Arabic before anyone could start. After that, it was wild – everyone reaching out for food. If Idd Thomma hadn't filled up his plate for him, Thomas wasn't sure that he would have had the nerve to just reach out and grab what he wanted.

Everyone also seemed to talk at once, but it was all in Arabic so Thomas ended up listening to Yuhanna and Idd Thomma who were speaking in English.

"So, what brings you to Amman, Thomma?"

Idd Thomma nodded as he finished a mouthful of rice.

"We go to Wadi Rum tomorrow, Yuhanna. The Revolt. My dear sons here want to hear all about it."

"And who wouldn't!" Yuhanna banged his fist on the table. Only a few people at the noisy table glanced in his direction even though it shook Thomas's plate. "The days when our fathers rode with Lurens in the desert!"

"Did your father ride with Lurens?" asked Ninan, interested, taking a gulp of lemonade.

"All the way to Aqaba!" said Yuhanna. "After that he stayed and assisted Emir Faisal in Aqaba."

“You see,” said Ninan to Thomas. “With a lot of help from Audah Abu Tayeh and his Howeitat tribe, Lawrence took Aqaba from the Turks. Then it became the new headquarters of the Arab Revolt.”

“I know,” nodded Thomas. “I remember it in the movie.”

“Oh, the movie!” said Yuhanna. “Mostly not true! Mostly not true! OK,” he conceded. “Maybe some of it is true.”

“It was all filmed in Wadi Rum,” said Ninan.

“Yes, that was true. But it left out a lot of important things. Did you know that Colonel Lawrence was a Christian?” he asked Thomas.

Thomas shook his head.

“Yes, that is why my father was proud to call him a friend, as was your great-grandfather. He was not the type of Christian to go and sit in a church. No, not that type.” Yuhanna shook his head. “He lived his faith. We are told to live a life of the Spirit and not the flesh, and that is exactly what he did. Every man was proud to ride with him because he took no thought for food or sleep. He was not a fat Englishman just thinking of his comfort. He suffered with us. He suffered for us so that we could have our freedom.”

“He was not a man all caught up with pleasures in this life,” said Idd Thomma, thoughtfully, reaching for a tabbouleh salad and loading up his and Thomas’s plate. “He suffered the heat, the bad water...”

“Ninan told me about the Turks throwing dead camels into wells,” said Thomas.

“Ah, so you know a little about it!” said Idd Thomma. “Good!”

“He was very tormented by what was done to us,” said Yuhanna. “He did everything he could to let us keep Syria. He knew the French wanted it and did everything to keep them out. Even after the war, he wrote letters to English newspapers telling them how we had been betrayed by our English allies.”

“I don’t understand all this French and English thing,” said Thomas.

“Basically,” said Yuhanna. “The English had two agreements. One with the French and one with the Arabs. The agreement with the French said that they would divide up Syria and Mesopotamia after the war was over. The agreement with the Arabs said that the Arabs would have independence when the war was over.”

“Actually,” said Idd Thomma, “they had three agreements if you count the one with the Jews.”

Yuhanna nodded. “Yes, Palestine for the Jews. You see, Thomas,” Yuhanna leaned forward. “Palestine was already the home of the Arabs. And many of them Nasara, Christian. Especially in places like Jerusalem and Bethlehem and Nazareth. So many of our brothers and sisters lost their homes and livelihoods in the conflicts with the Jews.”

“I never thought about all that.”

“I think it is time you did,” said Yuhanna, waving a fork in his direction.

The conversation moved in the direction of family and mutual friends in Amman. When the meal was over, the coffee brought out, the large group broke up into smaller groups. The women cleaned up, the children were put to bed and the men stayed out to talk in the cool night air.

Ninan took Thomas aside and they sat down on two patio chairs by themselves.

“You know, we have not had time to talk about this,” he said. “I mean, we are heading to Wadi Rum tomorrow. What are we going to do then? Abandon Idd Thomma to go look in every tent and see if someone is being held captive?”

“I didn’t think about that,” said Thomas, taking a sip of sweet coffee. “Is Wadi Rum a big place?”

Ninan rolled his eyes.

“OK,” said Thomas. “What you’re saying is, this is going to be difficult?”

“I do not know what we will do.”

The young men were silent as they sipped their coffee.

“I know!” said Thomas suddenly.

Ninan looked at him.

“We can pray!”

Ninan raised his eyebrows, but at the same time, he nodded.

“I did not think about that.”

“We could give it a shot,” said Thomas. “Wouldn’t hurt.”

“It wouldn’t hurt,” agreed Ninan. “OK, tonight, before bed, we will each say a prayer.”

“Agreed,” said Thomas.

“Tayyeb,” said Ninan. “Agreed.”

## FRIDAY ~ ON THE ROAD TO WADI RUM

Breakfast wasn't as lavish as dinner, but it was still filling.

A table in the kitchen was spread out with bowls of sliced tomatoes, cucumbers, olives, hummus and Arabic bread. A large copper pot held tea, or chai as everyone called it.

Ninan and Thomas had shared a double bed in a room that also held three other boys, but much younger. The younger boys, had gotten up early and all of their noise had gotten Ninan and Thomas up too.

"I have an idea," said Ninan. He had hustled his cousin into a small bathroom, ostensibly to shave, but more importantly, to talk. "We will probably stop at Rum. It is just a little village. But if anything is going on in the area, someone there would probably know. It would be too hard to talk to the village sheikh..."

"You mean they still have sheikhs?" asked Thomas, pausing with his razor.

"Of course," said Ninan. "There is a lot of stuff that a sheikh can do, like solve family problems. Take this family for example. If two people are having a problem they can go to Yuhanna and he will decide. His decision is final so it solves the problem. Sheikhs just do that but with a lot of families. Anyhow, we might have a hard time talking to him, but someone in the village is bound to know if a girl from Damascus is being held somewhere."

"Why do you think she was abducted?" asked Thomas, splashing water on his face and drying off with a towel hanging on a hook.

"My guess is she is being married to someone and does not want to do it. That still happens. It is not like the days of old, but people still have their traditions." Ninan had also finished shaving and after tossing their shaving equipment back in their overnight bags, they left the bathroom to go downstairs to breakfast. "But traditions get broken, right Idd Thomma?" Idd Thomma was sitting in a chair in the living room, his Bible on his lap. Yuhanna was on a couch with a newspaper. Both men had their chai, but had obviously finished breakfast.

"Eh? What's that?" said Idd Thomma, looking up.

"Just telling Thomas about traditions and how they change. Like you for example. Up until Thomas here was born, we all called you Abu Sami after Thomas's dad."

Thomas looked puzzled.

"It means Father of Sami," explained Ninan.

"Oh, because my dad's name is Samuel."

"Yes, but he is called Sami, yes?"

"By my mom, yeah."

"OK, but here is where tradition changed. When you were born, as I have heard the story, your parents sent a huge envelope of photos to the family here and your dad wrote that his dad was now, not just Abu Sami, but Idd Thomma. Well, everyone liked that idea and the name stuck. So instead of Idd Thomma continuing on as Father of Sami, he became Grandpa of Thomas."

"Wow," said Thomas. "I didn't realize that the Thomma part was referring to me. I thought your name *was* Thomma."

“It is,” said Idd Thomma. “You have my name. But Ninan is right. Idd Thomma is our family’s way of saying Grandfather of Thomma and you can thank your dad for starting that. Your ‘Ammi Mariam has a whole drawer full of the photos your parents sent to us over the years.”

This was all new to Thomas. He had no idea that his parents had been so proud of him.

“Eat up! Eat up!” said Idd Thomma, waving them to the kitchen. “We have a long drive.”

When breakfast was finished and everyone had wished them well, they headed down the hill they came and Idd Thomma directed them to the road out of Amman.

Thomas was expecting flat desert scenery but was surprised by the immense sandstone hills. He had never been to the Grand Canyon, but from what he had seen of the photos the whole terrain reminded him of Arizona. One of the roads they took was narrow and hugged the side of a cliff and when Thomas looked down out his window he couldn’t even see the road, only a sheer drop. Quickly he moved to the other side of the car to be behind Ninan. Idd Thomma, calmly reading a map, seemed oblivious to how close he was to a five hundred foot free fall.

Thomas was relieved when the terrain flattened out and he could appreciate the Biblical quality of the landscape – shepherd boys with their sheep, Bedouin men riding by on camels, the black goat-hair tents scattered here and there with women in long dresses moving around doing their daily chores.

Idd Thomma was studying his map.

“We must get on this road,” he said to Ninan, stabbing at his map. Ninan glanced at the map.

“Where are we now?” asked Ninan.

Idd Thomma pointed.



"That would be easy if we had camels," Ninan said. He took the map from Idd Thomma and studied it intently. Thankfully, it was a long straight stretch of road with only an occasional car coming from the other direction. "Let me see...at this village here," he pointed, "we can get on that road," he pointed, "and then over to here!" He handed the map back to Idd Thomma and Idd Thomma nodded his agreement.

"I want to follow the railway tracks," explained Idd Thomma.

"Mumken, mumken," said Ninan, reaching into his glove compartment for a CD.

"Let me see," said Idd Thomma, grabbing the CDs. "If I have to listen to music I want to have a choice."

Ninan grinned and gave Thomas a look in the rearview mirror.

"La, la, la, la, la," said Idd Thomma, browsing all of the CDs.

"That means no," explained Ninan.

Idd Thomma returned the CDs to the glove compartment and Ninan switched on the radio.

"La," said Idd Thomma at each station that Ninan turned to.

Finally, Idd Thomma said "Na'am."

It was a station playing some kind of Arabic folk music. Like John Denver singing about the Jordan Valley instead of Montana.

Ninan shook his head and gave Thomas another grin in the rearview mirror.

Once they came within sight of the railway tracks, Idd Thomma came alive. He switched off the radio to make sure that Thomas could hear him.



“There, there,” he said pointing. “This is the train that carried pilgrims to Mecca but it also carried Turkish troops to fight the Arabs in the Hijaz. When Lurens was with Faisal he became very sick and while he was in a tent recovering from his illness, an idea came to him. He thought about how the Turks mistreated their soldiers. They had very little respect for their own men. Bad food. Bad living conditions in the army. And keep in mind Thomma, many of those men were Arabs, conscripted, forced to fight for the Turks. And Lurens, knowing this, thought about how though the Turks did not value their men, they did value their equipment.”

“Do the trains still run?” asked Thomas. He would have liked to see a train in the desert.

“Yes, yes,” said Idd Thomma impatiently. “So Lurens decided that the best way to fight the Turks would be to attack their trains. To fight men would be silly. The Turks did not care about losing soldiers. And Lurens did not want to lose his Arabs. So he decided they would go in secretly, in small groups, and try to blow up trains. That would disrupt everything. The Turks would not have their precious supplies. And it would take them time to fix the tracks.”

“Yes,” said Thomas. “I think I understand. It makes sense.”

It helped that he had read so much of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. In this vast landscape, it was easy to imagine the Arab tribes gathering for war, each under their own banner, but all united for the cause of freedom.

“But there were battles too, right?” he asked.

“Oh yes, of course,” said Idd Thomma. “But Lurens was not interested in Arabs dying. So his plan was to cause as much problems as he could for the Turks without losing any of his men.”

“I like his war philosophy,” said Ninan. “I would not want to die young.”

“You will die young if you do not slow down this car a little bit,” said Idd Thomma. Ninan had been taking advantage of the long straight road to max out. “And I will die too. But at least I will die old after a full life.”

Ninan shook his head and slightly eased off the gas.

Thomas was hoping they’d stop for lunch soon, but there didn’t seem to be any fast food take-out in the desert.

“What do we do for food out here?” he asked.

“Well,” said Ninan. “First of all, we could buy a goat from one of the Bedouins. Then we would make a spit and then we would roast the goat. Or, we could get the rifle out of my trunk and do a bit of hunting. Or, if we find an ostrich, we could get some eggs and bake them in the sand...”

Thomas started to realize his cousin was joking, especially when he saw the smile on Idd Thomma’s face.

Idd Thomma reached into his overnight bag and pulled out a sack of nuts.

“Here,” he said handing them back to Thomas.

After a little more rustling around in his bag, he also found water bottles for all of them.

“Now,” he said, settling back in his chair. “If we were with Lurens, our meal would be simple. We would have a bag of flour and we would mix some water with a bit of flour and then we would put it in the ashes of the fire and out would come bread.”

“It’s that easy to make bread?” asked Thomas, his mouth full of nuts.



“The Bedouin still do it,” said Idd Thomma.

“So, where are we staying tonight?” asked Ninan.

Thomas half-expected his grandfather to say that he had a Bedouin friend and they’d be staying in his tent.

“That is my surprise,” said Idd Thomma, beaming.

Thomas hadn’t been aware that there was any pending surprise.

“Tonight, we do not stay in Wadi Rum. We stay in Aqaba!”

“Wow!” said Ninan. “Aqaba! I’ve never been there!”

“You mean, the place that Lawrence took from the Turks?” asked Thomas. “The place right on the water?”

“That’s right,” said Idd Thomma. “We will stay in a nice hotel right on the water. My treat.”

“Thanks Idd Thomma!” said Ninan, stepping on the gas.

“Why are you speeding?” asked Idd Thomma. “Do you not you want to get there alive?”

“It is a long drive,” explained Ninan. “If we want to get there while it is still today, I have to drive like this.”

Ninan was right about it being a long drive. As enchanting as the red sandstone and rock formations had been initially, it had become monotonous after four hours. Both Ninan and Idd Thomma seemed to have a stamina for long journeys and when Thomas had mentioned that they might like to stop, Idd Thomma had launched into a story of Lurens great trek across the desert on his camel to take Aqaba from the Turks. He talked about the unforgiving sun and the desperate desire for water.

Thomas felt he was experiencing both. The windows were down and he was getting a good breeze, but it was a hot breeze. The sun was blazing above them and even sunglasses weren’t blocking out the rays. He had finished his water bottle ages ago.

They passed through a small village and Thomas saw an outdoor store that appeared to have cases of soda.

“Hamdulillah!” he practically screamed.

Ninan and Idd Thomma looked at each other and then burst out laughing.

“What I mean is, can I buy you guys something to drink?”

Ninan pulled off the road and Thomas hurried to push forward the front seat and climb out as soon as Idd Thomma had stepped outside the car. His legs were stiff. But he managed to make it to the small stand where he began loading up his arms with orange pop and bags of various candies. Idd Thomma came over and selected some oranges as well as some more water bottles. Ninan meandered over and picked out a bag of dried fruit.

The journey continued, but at least he had his candy to munch on. The radio was on and even if his grandfather refused to listen to anything with a beat, some of the music was OK. The speed of Ninan’s driving guaranteed that they wouldn’t be on the road any longer than they had to be.

Nonetheless, the sun was going down when Idd Thomma announced that, based on his map, they would be in Aqaba in about half an hour. It might have been his imagination, but Thomas thought that the breeze had gotten cooler and that he could feel moisture.



What Thomas wasn't prepared for was the sudden appearance of a bustling resort town. There were high-rise hotels as well as low-rise resorts. Restaurants were everywhere and people were out in the streets enjoying the cool night air. Most were dressed casually, European-style. A large Jordanian flag flew proudly as they drove along the concrete road into the heart of the town.

Despite all the buildings, what dominated Aqaba was the Gulf. All the hotels were built along its shore.

"This looks good," said Idd Thomma, pointing to one of the resorts. "The Coral Bay Hotel," he read.

Ninan pulled into the parking lot.

"It looks expensive, Idd Thomma," he said.

Idd Thomma waved his hand to dismiss any further discussion.

"It looks nice," said Thomas, peering out his window. Though it was dark, everything was well lit.

The Coral Bay Resort paid homage to the desert with its brown squared-off buildings and archways, but it had a luxurious air about it.

"I will see about us getting rooms," said Idd Thomma when Ninan had parked.

While Idd Thomma headed into the main building, Ninan got out and stretched. Thomas joined him.

"Idd Thomma is really going for the luxury," said Ninan. "It is very nice of him."

"Oh, I appreciate it," Thomas assured him. "I thought we'd be spending the night in a Bedouin tent."

Idd Thomma came out with a key and announced that he had a room.

They grabbed their overnight bags and followed him.

There room was on the second floor and overlooked the Gulf of Aqaba.  
“It’s beautiful,” said Thomas, walking over and looking out the window.



Idd Thomma, who had been testing out his bed, came over. “Yes, and imagine how Lurens must have felt seeing it for the first time after conquering it.”

“I think I can imagine it,” said Thomas nodding. “If it were me, the first thing I would do after coming out of the desert would be to take a swim in the Gulf.”

Ninan laughed.

“Idd Thomma did not warn us to bring our swim clothes,” said Ninan.

“Now that is a problem very easily solved,” said Idd Thomma. “The hotel has a gift shop and the gift shop sells such things. You go down there right now and get some swim clothes. Just put it on our bill.”

The young men looked at each other.

“Thanks Idd Thomma!” they said at the same time.

“But do not swim in the Gulf!” he called out after them as they headed for the door. “I do not want you getting hit by a boat! They have a very good swimming pool!”

Ninan and Thomas raced downstairs and selected bathing trunks, then back upstairs to change. Idd Thomma was washing up.

“I will meet you down there,” he said.

Ten minutes later, Ninan and Thomas were splashing around in the pool. The pool had a bar and snack stand and there were a lot of people sitting around having a drink and nibbling on everything from falafels to French fries.

“Ah, this is the life, yes?” said Ninan, splashing Thomas.

“It sure is,” said Thomas splashing back. “I didn’t think I’d be swimming in the desert!”

When Idd Thomma joined them, they got out of the pool and had a light meal of falafel sandwiches from the snack stand.

As hard as it was to believe, after a long drive in the car, Ninan and Thomas agreed that they were too tired to sightsee and that all they wanted to do was climb in between the white sheets and go to bed. Idd Thomma was pleased.

“We will get good value for our money if we have a long sleep in those beds,” he said.



## SATURDAY ~ CONTINUING ON THE ROAD TO WADI RUM

“Now, back on the Desert Highway,” said Idd Thomma, consulting his map.

They were in the car, but Ninan had assured Thomas that it was a short trip, only 50 kilometres, or so.

“What will we do when we get there?” asked Thomas.

“You are in a hurry to arrive?” asked Idd Thomma, folding his map and putting it in the glove compartment. “We turn off at El Guweira,” he said as an aside to Ninan.

“No, I mean yes, I want to go to Wadi Rum. But I just like to know what’s next.”

“Enjoy the journey, Thomma,” said his grandfather waving his hand out at the scenery. The feeling of being in a coastal resort was rapidly being replaced with the feeling of being in a desert. “Usually God doesn’t tell us what is coming next.”

God and Idd Thomma, thought Thomas. But he didn’t mind the advice.

He’d left some of his chocolate candies in the car and they had melted in their bag.

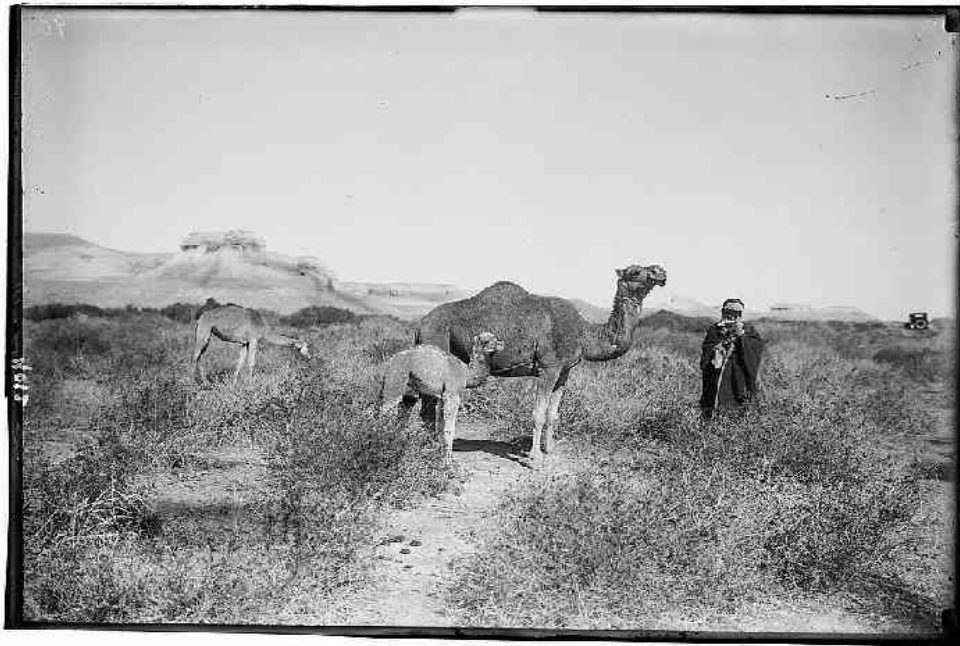
It was a good thing they’d had a full breakfast.

The resort restaurant had had a breakfast buffet of Middle Eastern fare – Arabic bread, hummus, tomato, cucumber, yogurt, fried eggs, cheese, a wide-variety of pastries and tea. There had been American-style items as well, but Thomas found himself passing them by in favour of the Arabic dishes. Idd Thomma had encouraged them to eat up since it was included with their room.

“So, all this was seen with the eyes of Lurens and King Faisal,” said Idd Thomma, pointing out their window. A large truck zipped by them. “Well, maybe not that.”

“I imagine they did not travel on a paved road,” said Ninan.

“No, but their eyes must have seen that over there,” said Idd Thomma pointing to one rock formation that was shaped like an arch. “King Faisal said that he was happiest when he was riding through the desert on his camel.”



“I read that one time a British sea captain let Faisal come aboard his ship and gave him a cabin and after he’d had a bath and a meal and was smoking in an easy chair, he said that this was like paradise.”

Idd Thomma’s head swiveled to look at Thomas.

“Thomma! How did you know this?”

“Uh, I’ve been reading *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* while I’m here,” said Thomas, modestly.

“Wonderful, Thomma! Wonderful!”

Thomas blushed slightly.

“You see though what kind of man Faisal was,” said Idd Thomma. “He was a man who was content. Like our Paul said, if we have food and clothing we will be content.”

Somehow, having been to Damascus himself, the apostle Paul seemed more real to Thomas. Not just some vague figure in the Bible.

“It’s all we need,” said Idd Thomma, staring out the window at a black tent with a Bedouin family scattered around it. “We need very little.”

“I think Idd Thomma is regretting that we Arabs came out of the desert into the towns,” said Ninan, grinning at Thomas in the rearview mirror.

“Oh, I like towns as much as anybody,” said Idd Thomma. “And I do not think that all virtue is found in the desert. But peace and simplicity certainly feel a lot closer out here.”

Ninan was right about the drive being short. Especially when compared with that of the previous day’s.

“What’s that?” asked Thomas, pointing at something that seemed to be a fort. Outside were men wearing an outfit he hadn’t see before – a long khaki robe with a red leather bandoleer across the chest and a white and red checkered keffiyah. The men had holsters that held a dagger and rifles were slung over their backs.

“This must be Rum. Those are the Desert Patrol,” said Ninan, as they pulled into a small village with a mix of tents and concrete buildings.

“Pretty cool,” said Thomas, turning around to get a second look.

“And why do we need to stop here?” said Idd Thomma.

“Well,” said Ninan, parking in front of a small shop. “I figure Thomas needs to replenish his supply of candy and soda pop.”

“I guess it would not hurt to get out and have a look around,” said Idd Thomma, conceding. “I think I have some supplies to pick up too.”

“Come on,” said Ninan, grabbing Thomas’s hand as soon as he had got out behind Idd Thomma. He was hurrying him into the small shop. In a low voice he said, “Here is where we have to ask some questions.”

Thomas looked back at his grandfather who was stretching and looking around. He didn’t seem interested in following them into the store.

Thomas selected some candy and gum and a few bottles of pop while Ninan engaged the storekeeper in an Arabic conversation. The man was shaking his head and looking a little puzzled. It didn’t seem like he had any information to give them.

“Well,” said Ninan when they came out, “we will just have to look around a bit more.”

Thomas dropped his small bag off in the car.

“Where’s Idd Thomma?” he asked.

“Over there,” said Ninan, nodding in the direction of one particular tent. There was a group of older men sitting around drinking tea or coffee and Idd Thomma was right in the middle of it, talking and laughing.

“Good! That means he will be busy for awhile,” said Ninan. “We will look around.”

“What about those Desert Patrol guys?” asked Thomas. “Wouldn’t they know if anything was going on?”

Ninan nodded.

“There was one in the store buying a newspaper,” he said. “We can talk to him when he comes out.”

It turned out they didn’t need to approach the man. He came to them, swigging a bottle of water and carrying the paper under his arm.

“Mohamed says that you are looking for someone,” he said, stopping right in front of them. It was a bit intimidating to have the well-armed warrior so close.

“That is right,” said Ninan bravely. “We had a message from someone in Damascus, a note, saying that he or she had been brought to Wadi Rum and was being held prisoner. And we came to see if someone needed help.”

“That is very noble,” said the man, thoughtfully, “to come all that way. Do you know who wrote the note?”

“No sir,” said Ninan. “It was just pushed under the door of an apartment building.”

“A mystery,” said the man, taking another swig of water. “Well, I can assure you that I know of no one who is being held prisoner.”

“Nobody is getting married soon?” asked Ninan.

The man smiled, understanding the implications.

“Yes, there is an upcoming marriage. But both the man and the woman are from Rum. No one was kidnapped from Damascus.”

Ninan nodded.

“I will keep my ears open,” said the man, taking his final drink. “And if anyone is being held against their will, I will see to it that they are returned to their family at once.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Ninan as the man turned away.

“I think we can just leave it at that for awhile,” said Ninan. “I trust him.”

“Me too,” said Thomas. “I think we would only stir things up if we walked around the village asking about someone being abducted.”

“Let us just keep our eyes open from now on,” said Ninan.

As they wandered around the village, the most interesting event going on seemed to be a soccer game on the outskirts.

They watched as they sipped their orange pop.

“Come! Come!” called one of the older boys, noticing them on the sidelines.

Though Thomas had never played soccer apart from gym class, he found he did OK, particularly since the average age of the players was about 10. Ninan, on the other hand, was a star. He rapidly moved the ball across the dusty field, scoring again and again for his team. After establishing his prowess, he made a point of passing the ball to other team mates and either giving them a chance to practice passing it back or else take a shot on the net themselves. The net just consisted of a few dusty pylons, but nobody

minded. The amount of enjoyment generated by the whole game was disproportionate to the actual amount of stuff needed to make it happen. After the game broke up, they headed back to the centre of the small village.

“Good news! Good news!” Idd Thomma called out to them from the tent. He waited for Ninan and Thomas to join him before telling them the good news. “I have rented us some camels! These men are from the noble Howeitat tribe and Abdul-Hakim will help us.”

Camel rides! Ninan and Thomas looked at each other.

Idd Thomma and Abdul-Hakim were on their feet heading towards some camels behind the tent.

“Have you ever ridden a camel before?” asked Thomas to Ninan.

“Oh sure,” said Ninan sarcastically. “All the time. I ride a camel to school everyday.”

“OK, OK, so what you’re telling me is that not every Arab has ridden a camel.”

“Exactly.”

“They’re pretty high up,” said Thomas as they arrived in front of the herd. “Do you think it will hurt to fall off?”

“No,” said Abdul-Hakim. “Not if you fall on the sand and not if you fall on your...” He pointed to his seat. He and Idd Thomma had a good laugh.

Evidently, Idd Thomma was one of the Arabs who *had* ridden a camel because when Abdul-Hakim commanded one of the camels to kneel down, Idd Thomma easily climbed on and made himself comfortable. Ninan was next. He hesitated but managed to climb on and stay on.

Thomas took a deep breath and said a quick prayer when it was his turn.

The camel was an enormous creature and with a lot of help from Abdul-Hakim, he got into the saddle. But when the camel stood up, he wasn’t prepared for how fast and how high she would take him. He felt himself slipping but with a little shove from Abdul-Hakim he was able to straighten out and get his balance.

Glancing over at Ninan, he was gratified to see that Ninan also seemed to be clinging for dear life.

Abdul-Hakim and Idd Thomma were nudging their camels forward and Abdul-Hakim seemed to only need to make a noise to get the others to follow.

Thomas was hugging his camel, his body practically horizontal. Ninan wasn’t sitting up much straighter.

“Somehow I don’t think Lawrence of Arabia rode all the way to Aqaba like this,” Thomas called out to Ninan.

Idd Thomma turned back to call out, “Lurens was very good on a camel.”

Abdul-Hakim nodded vigorously. “Many in my tribe rode with him. He lived like us while he was here. Many come to see Wadi Rum because of him.”

He and Idd Thomma carried on at a gentle pace and it gave Thomas and Ninan a chance to ease their way up until they were almost sitting straight.

“This isn’t so bad,” Thomas called out to Ninan.

“Do not talk that way,” replied Ninan. “You say something like that and the next thing you know, your camel is running off into the desert.”

“Good point,” said Thomas, tightening his grip.



It obviously wasn't Idd Thomma's intention to reenact the travels of Lawrence because the camel ride only lasted about half an hour.

"Not too sore?" said Abdul-Hakim, grinning as he helped them off their camels.

"Not too sore," said Thomas, grinning back.

"Very hard on the seat to do a long journey for the first time," explained Abdul-Hakim. "You'll get used to it as we go into the desert."

"On camel?" said Thomas, incredulously. "I thought we were taking the car..."

Idd Thomma and Abdul-Hakim had a good laugh over this before Idd Thomma hurried off in the direction of the stores.

"Some shopping to do," he called out behind him.

"Probably more water," said Ninan, heading back to the car. "You need it in this heat."

After about 20 minutes, Idd Thomma came out of one of the shops with a lot more than water. He had several cases of water but he also had a bags of food and sleeping bags.

"Sleeping bags?" asked Ninan.

"What, you think my friend Yuhanna, should let us stay for *two* nights? No, tonight we will sleep under the stars." Idd Thomma was heading for the camels. Abdul-Hakim began organizing the supplies.

Ninan looked at Thomas and they raised their eyebrows. This was going to be bigger than they thought.

"Where do we go from here?" he asked Idd Thomma.

"We will ride out a bit and then camp. There is much too see around here. Many birds. Many plants." Idd Thomma was going through one bag that didn't go with the camels.

"For you," he said, handing Thomas a piece of red and white checkered cloth. He did the same to Ninan.

"Thanks, Idd Thomma!" said Thomas, looking it over. It was a keffiyah and black agal similar to the ones of the Desert Patrol. "This is so cool!"

"Well, hopefully it will keep you cool. Now put it on," said Idd Thomma. He had one for himself and was adjusting it on his head. "I do not want you getting heatstroke."

Getting on a camel was a little easier than second time. But Thomas was still clinging to the saddle.

"What does Wadi mean?" asked Thomas, trying to ignore the wobbly feeling.

"Valley," replied Ninan, who was similarly intent on not falling off.

"Yes, I guess that makes sense," said Thomas looking around.

Though the scenery had been impressive from the car, it was even more spectacular as one walked through the red sandstone formations – each one unique. They walked for an hour, admiring each formation. Some had arches, some were sheer cliffs, others looked like pillars.

They weren't the only ones. Bedouins passed by with more camels and tourists. In the distance, a vehicle more suited for desert driving than Ninan's little car passed along on a sandy road. There was the occasional Bedouin tent and even the occasional Western-style tent, obviously belonging to the more rugged type of tourists than just day-trippers.



“We might get lost,” said Thomas.

“Uskut! Hush! You don't want to offend our guide,” said Ninan.

They stopped periodically to drink some water or to eat an orange and Idd Thomma was always quick to point out a new bird or a new plant – two things that up til now had never been worthy of Thomas’s attention. But somehow, in the desert, with no place to go and no time when one had to be there, these little things were interesting.

“Look! What’s that?” asked Thomas, pointing to something moving along the side of one of the cliffs.

“A mountain goat!” said Ninan. “I wish I had a pair of binoculars!”

“You must keep your eyes open,” said Idd Thomma. “There are many animals in the desert. Wolves, foxes, wildcats.”

Thomas wondered what his parents would think of him wandering around in the desert on a camel with wild animals. Maybe they had anticipated this and considered it a rite to manhood.

The funny thing was, he wasn’t scared. In fact, he was having a good time. The desert was freedom. It was just there to be enjoyed. He looked forward to getting back to Damascus and reading more of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* now that he had seen some of the places that Lawrence had described, but for now, he was content to be walking along the sandy path in a world that was timeless and open. He was even getting used to the rhythm of his camel.

Abdul-Hakim suggested that they set up a camp in the shadow of a formation shaped like a giant cone.

Setting up camp basically consisted of getting down their heavy loads of food and water, though the water had gotten slightly lighter as the day progressed.

“Now we need a fire,” said Idd Thomma. “You must gather some kindling.”

“Only dead branches,” called out Abdul-Hakim. “Wadi Rum is a conservation area.”

Ninan and Thomas looked at each other.

“Where do we start?” asked Ninan.

“Just stay within sight of your camp,” said Abdul-Hakim. “I am going to leave you now and come back in the morning. I have friends over there who I will stay with.” He waved a vague hand in a general direction.

Ninan and Thomas set out to find some dried branches while Idd Thomma started arranging the firewood. As it turned out, part of Abdul-Hakim's service was to bring some small logs for a fire, they just needed a bit of kindling.

“Come on!” said Ninan, as they came to a rock formation that gently sloped up and seemed to settle into a plateau at the top. “We can climb!”

“I don’t think there’s any kindling up there,” said Thomas, but Ninan was already scrambling up the rock side.

“It does not matter,” Ninan called out behind him. “There is plenty of time before dark. Idd Thomma knows that we will explore.”

That's when it dawned on Thomas that part of sending them out for kindling was Idd Thomma's way of letting them enjoy the desert's beauty.

Although the rock formation they climbed wasn't especially high, it did give them a wide view of their surrounding area. Ninan sat down and Thomas joined him.

“Ah, this is the life, cousin, is it not?”

“It is,” agreed Thomas. There was something relaxing about just sitting and staring into the sandy distance.

Idd Thomma gave them a wave from the shade of their camp and they waved back.

“Well,” said Ninan standing up after an indeterminable amount of time. “Let’s try to find that kindling.”

There were a few dead branches beneath a bush on the other side of the rock formation that they had just climbed. When they returned to camp, Idd Thomma started on the fire.

“What’s for dinner?” asked Thomas. All he could see was a bag of flour.

“Once I get a fire we will eat the most simple desert meal.”

“Bread baked in ashes,” said Ninan, grinning and looking at Thomas for a reaction.

“Bread in ashes? You mean that flour and water thing you were talking about?” asked Thomas. He was somewhat disappointed. He had been expecting a BBQ.

“It tastes good when you are hungry,” Idd Thomma assured him. “And you will be hungry by the time we have enough ashes.”

Thomas hunted around the bags only to discover that he’d left his bag of candy in the car. More melted chocolate.

Ninan passed him an orange and between the two of them they ate about a dozen before Idd Thomma announced that it was time to mix their flour and water.

The sun was going down and Thomas was glad they had a fire to huddle around. The temperature had dropped.

“Like this,” said Idd Thomma, taking a handful of flour from the bag and gently pouring some water from a bottle onto it. “Now mix.”

When they all had some respectable balls of dough, they patted them down and flat and with the help of a stick, buried them in the ash.

Idd Thomma also set to work making a primitive pot of coffee with some coffee grounds and a small pot.

The stars were starting to come out.

Thomas got out his sleeping bag and wrapped it around himself. Idd Thomma and Ninan seemed to be made of tougher stuff.

By the time the bread was ready, he was starving. Idd Thomma removed the baked bread and they dusted the ash off. Then he gave them each a small cup of sweet coffee. And he was right. It was good. Not only did it help to warm him up but he was so ravenous that anything would have tasted good.

“The stars,” said Idd Thomma, as they concluded their meal.

“I know!” said Thomas looking up. “I was just thinking about that! I’ve never seen anything like it!”

It was better than a movie. There were thousands of stars all twinkling and all so close that it felt like you could reach out and grab one. He had never realized that the sky held so many stars.

“Our father Abraham saw these stars,” said Idd Thomma.

“Wasn’t there some promise about the stars?” asked Thomas, wrapping his sleeping bag closer to himself.

“Yes,” said Idd Thomma. “His children were to be as many as the stars. And you are one of those children, Thomma.”

He had never thought about that before.

“I am? Yeah, I guess I am.”

“You are a son of Ishmael, and you can take great pride in that. But you are also a child of the promises of God. Paul said that if we are Christ’s children then we are Abraham’s children and all the promises to him belong to us.”

The desert made it all easy to imagine – Abraham talking to God under the stars. A promised land. The whole thing seemed so real now.

Sipping the coffee, staring up at the stars, the men were silent, each with their own thoughts but each joined together by common heritage and now, common experiences.

## **SUNDAY ~ A RACE & A STOP IN WADIMOUSA**

The morning air was chilly. The fire had long died out.

But the sleeping bag was warm and Thomas didn't want to climb out. Nature's call eventually forced him out of the warm cocoon.

There were some more oranges for breakfast and Idd Thomma promised them a more substantial meal on the road.

Abdul-Hakim arrived and they packed up the bags and headed back towards the village of Rum and the Desert Highway. It didn't take long for the day to begin to warm up and for them to lighten their load a bit by drinking more water.

The enchantment of yesterday lingered but the journey back was past things they had already seen.

Abdul-Hakim, however, had a surprise for them.

"We will stop at the tent of my friends," he said. "They will be happy to meet you."

They deviated from the route that would take them back in the direction they had come and stopped at one of the black goat-hair tents.

The men sitting around a small fire snickered as they dismounted from their camels. Thomas didn't blame them. He practically slid off of his.

But the men were quick to welcome them and offer them coffee.

Although Thomas could hear women's voices, no women were actually seen. Since the tent was divided into two and only one side was open, he presumed they were hidden behind the curtains of the second side.

The men waved for them to sit down and, speaking Arabic, they introduced themselves. Idd Thomma introduced Thomas but after that his lack of Arabic kept him from the conversation. Ninan did a bit of translating when he wasn't talking. The men around the fire were of all ages so Ninan ended up talking mostly to a young man his age.

"Did you ask him about the girl?" asked Thomas, in a low voice. Idd Thomma and the older Arabs were having a good laugh so he was sure he wasn't heard.

Ninan nodded.

"That's just what we were talking about. He says he has not heard anything but that it is all interesting. He would know if it was a Bedouin thing. But there is no prisoner among the Bedouins."

The young man was grinning at Thomas in a friendly way. It made him regret that he didn't know Arabic. He felt rude for never having taken the time to learn another language.

Ninan and the young man continued talking quietly. After awhile Ninan gave Thomas a summary of what they had said.

"It could be a tourist," said Ninan. "Tourists from all over the world come here. If a tourist had a prisoner, he would not know about it."

"That's it?" asked Thomas. "You've been talking for, like, fifteen minutes and that's all you've said?"

Ninan grinned.

"What is the fun in talking if we just come to the point right away?"

Obviously Abdul-Hakim and Idd Thomma felt the same because they talked for another hour, sipping their coffee and refilling their cups.

As the sun started to become uncomfortably hot, the men moved back to the shade of the tent and Abdul-Hakim announced that it was time for their party to move on.

There was more for the Bedouin to snicker about as they mounted their camels.

They were on a new path now and Abdul-Hakim pointed out some interesting rock formations, including one called the seven pillars of wisdom.

"Is that what Lawrence of Arabia named his book after?" Thomas called out to his grandfather.

"No," said Idd Thomma, over his shoulder. "It was named that after he published his book and made this area famous. His title comes from a scripture in the Proverbs. Suleiman said, wisdom has built her house, she has hewn out her seven pillars."

"Let's have a camel race," suggested Abdul-Hakim, mischievously, looking at Idd Thomma for a reaction.

Thomas and Ninan exchanged horrified looks.

Idd Thomma shrugged.

"I think it is obvious who would win," he said.

Abdul-Hakim smiled modestly.

"Me!" cried Idd Thomma, nudging his camel. Off he went, galloping across the desert.

Abdul-Hakim let out a loud laugh before nudging his camel and galloping after Idd Thomma.

No rules had been laid out but it was obvious that Idd Thomma was heading for one particular rock formation that had a glorious natural arch.

"What should we do?" asked Thomas.

"Well, we cannot just sit here. We had better follow," said Ninan.

Though neither Thomas nor Ninan had given any hint to their camels that they wanted to speed up, the camels certainly seemed to want to keep up with the ones who had gone on ahead.

"Umm, how do you make these things stop?" asked Thomas, nervously as his mount started trotting.

"I do not know!" cried Ninan. His camel was already ahead of Thomas's. "How should I know?" And his camel was off, galloping in the direction of Abdul-Hakim and Idd Thomma.

Thomas's camel could no longer restrain herself. She let fly and Thomas dropped down on her neck and held on. As he overtook Ninan, he admired that Ninan was still riding in a dignified upright position.

Although Abdul-Hakim won the race by about a camel's length and he was generous with his praise for Idd Thomma's ability considering he was not a Bedouin. Thankfully, by the time Thomas and Ninan reached them, he was done recovering from the race and able to focus on stopping the other camels which he did with a few sharp Arabic words.

Ninan rode to the finish line with grace and dignity and was praised by Abdul-Hakim for his form. Thomas was praised for not falling off.

"No camels in Kanandaa?" asked Abdul-Hakim, grinning.

Thomas shook his head.

"In a zoo maybe."

"That was kind of fun," said Ninan.

Idd Thomma beamed.

"It would not take you long to get used to it," he said. "What do you think Thomma?" he asked Thomas.

Thomas nodded.

"I could get into it."

"Good," said Idd Thomma.

Following Abdul-Hakim, they carried on back to the village of Rum. But Thomas noticed that they weren't going as slow as they had been before the race. Abdul-Hakim seemed to consider the race an initiation into more serious, speedier, camel riding.

By the time they got back to Rum and unloaded the camels and said goodbye to Abdul-Hakim, it was well after noon.

When they got into the car, Thomas discovered yet another bag of melted candy.

"Well, after all that exercise we probably need some food, yes?" said Idd Thomma.

"Let me guess," said Ninan, grinning. "We're going to go to a Bedouin feast where they will slaughter a sheep in our honour and serve it on a giant platter of rice. Because Thomas is the guest of honour, he will be given the eyeballs of the sheep to eat and if he does not do it, he will greatly offend our hosts."

Thomas was revolted at the thought.

"I was thinking more of a restaurant," said Idd Thomma, examining the map. "Are we on the King's Highway?" he asked Ninan.

Ninan nodded.

"Good. We just take this to Wadi Mousa. There will be a place to eat there and it's not very far."

"Wadi Mousa?" said Ninan. "That is the village by Petra?"

Idd Thomma nodded.

"Petra?" said Thomas. "Isn't that the red rose city..."

"...half as old as time," Ninan finished for him.

"Yes," said Idd Thomma. "It is quite spectacular. But we will save that for another trip. Ninan must get back to his studies."

Ninan glanced at his watch.

"I guess we will not make it back to Al Sham today. That's Damascus for you back there," he said to Thomas.

"No," said Idd Thomma, thoughtfully. "Not unless we drive well into the night."

"That is OK," said Ninan. "This is an adventure. I do not mind a holiday."

The reached Wadi Mousa within an hour and as they got out of the car, Idd Thomma asked him what he thought of the Valley of Moses.



“Oh, is that what it means?” he asked. “Wow,” he said surveying the scenery. “What a view!” It was a hilly area and Idd Thomma pointed to the lowest part of the valley where the ancient city of Petra lay.

Though there were many hotels which would have had restaurants, Ninan and Idd Thomma seemed more comfortable heading for the little souk where the locals shopped. There they purchased three large falafel sandwiches and some colas in a little outdoor cafe and watched the mix of people doing their shopping. There were quite a few tourists stocking up on souvenirs mixed in with the Arabs doing their food shopping.

“Well, that was good,” said Idd Thomma, wiping his hands on a napkin. “Now we must get back on the road.”

Ninan and Idd Thomma stood by patiently while Thomas bought yet another bag of candies and chocolates for the the car ride.

The drive was getting a little monotonous and Thomas found himself just staring out the window and listening to Idd Thomma and Ninan talk. At first they spoke in English so that he could join in if he wanted to, but when he started drifting off to sleep, they switched over to Arabic. When he woke up it was starting to get dark.

“Where are we?” he asked sleepily.



“Past Amman,” Ninan called out. “We will probably stop at Irbid for the night.” Thomma noticed that the scenery was becoming less rural and more urban.

“This is a big town,” he said.

“We have them in the Middle East,” Ninan gave him a big smile in the rearview mirror.

“Did anything important happen here?” asked Thomas.

“Oh, I am sure something did,” said Idd Thomas. “I just do not know what it is. Now keep your eyes open for a place to spend the night. Nothing for tourists. They raise the prices for tourists.”

Thomas was at a disadvantage since he couldn't understand the Arabic signs but Ninan quickly spotted a small sign for a hotel that was obviously not catering to Westerners.

They parked in a tiny lot and went inside.

The hotel lobby was narrow and dark and there were a few older men in the lobby playing chess. The man behind the counter greeted them in Arabic and after a short conversation, Idd Thomma handed Ninan a key.

“The rooms hold one or two people,” he said. “You two have a room and I have one beside you.”

They walked up a flight of stairs to their floor and said their good nights at their doors.

The room barely held two narrow beds with a small sink in the corner.

“Where's the bathroom?” asked Thomas.

“Down the hall,” said Ninan, yawning and sitting down on the bed. Since Ninan hadn't had a nap in the car, Thomas let him use the bathroom first and soon he was sleeping in his bed.

But Thomas was wide-awake. He opened the curtains and the window and looked out at the night city. Like Amman, the skyline was filled with low-rises, high-rises and minarets. There were still people moving around on the street, many of them coming in and out of restaurants or sitting in outdoor cafes enjoying the cool night air.

After the hot desert air, Thomas appreciated the breeze.

From his window, he could see a few people sitting on their balconies, just watching the scene below like he was doing.

Nothing big was happening. Nothing unusual. Just people living their lives.

And that's when Thomas suddenly felt different. He didn't feel like a visitor anymore. This land was his. He felt like an Arab. All the history that had happened in this land was his history and all that went on today was his too. He was an Arab in an Arab town just watching his fellow Arabs.

## MONDAY ~ THE ROAD BACK TO DAMASCUS

Since the hotel didn't serve breakfast, they had to find a place to eat in Irbid.

After a short walk down the urban street they went into a small restaurant that served the traditional Arabic breakfast of flat bread, white cheese, olives, yogurt, cucumbers and tomatoes, as well as sweet tea. Thomas, who didn't normally eat cucumbers and tomatoes, was noticing that the ones in the Middle East were sweeter and tastier than the ones in the grocery stores of Canada. The ones in the Middle East must get more sun, he decided.

Idd Thomma stopped in front of a street vendor's table to examine a large selection of CD's. With every CD that Idd Thomma picked up, Ninan groaned. Thomas could see the twinkle in his grandfather's eyes and Ninan's increasing groans just seemed to spur him on to buy more CDs.

"Hamdulillah, it is a short drive home," muttered Ninan, as Idd Thomma gave the man some money.

Then it was back to the hotel parking lot to get their car.

Despite Idd Thomma's CDs, Ninan seemed to cheer up at being back on the road and able to speed along the highway. If the Bedouin enjoyed their camel races, the urban Arabs seemed to enjoy their fast driving.

Thomas reflected on how the trip had been remarkably free of lecturing. He didn't know how his grandfather had gotten a reputation for an obsession with the Arab Revolt. Even now, he and Ninan were just discussing everyday things – the price of food in Jordan versus Syria, Ninan's classes, some new building that was going up in the centre of Damascus. The only people who had felt the full force of his grandfather's interest in history were the border guards when they had passed back into Syria. Idd Thomma had enthusiastically told them how they were following the route of Faisal into Damascus and how they had been as far south as Aqaba....

They had very quickly been permitted to pass the border.

"So," said Thomas suddenly. "We're on the route that Faisal took to ride into Damascus?"

Idd Thomma nodded and pulled his CD out of the player to put in a new one. It was left to Ninan to fill in the details.

"You see, we went to Aqaba, but before that, the Arab Revolt was being fought in the Hijaz, which is now in Saudi Arabia. You remember the Hijaz? It contains Mecca and Medina. That's where the Arab Revolt started."

"OK," said Thomas. "How did it end up in Damascus?"

"Well," explained Ninan. "Damascus was the centre of Arab nationalism then. It is something we take for granted now, but the Turks wanted us all speaking Turkish instead of Arabic and anyone who stood up for the rights of the Arabs to rule themselves was considered an enemy. Many people died at the time."

"OK," said Thomas. "I think I get it. Damascus would be the logical place for the whole thing to end. But how did the army get from Aqaba to Damascus?"

"That is interesting," said Ninan. "You see, once the Arabs had Aqaba, they ended up fighting along side with the British. The British were moving up through Palestine while we were on the other side of the Jordan moving up along what is now the

country of Jordan. Faisal was then under the army of General Allenby, the British army, rather than just the leader of a local revolt.”

“Oh, that's right,” said Thomas. “It's kind of coming back to me. So a lot of train tracks got blown up in Jordan?”

“Oh yes,” said Ninan. “A lot of Lurens's famous things happened in Jordan.”

“Wow,” said Thomas, leaning back in his seat. “That's cool. Thanks Idd Thomma!”

“For what?” Idd Thomma was surprised.

“For taking us to this cool place.”

“Actually, it is very hot.”

“No, I mean, thank you for taking us to this really *interesting* place.”

“Well, it was your idea to come here,” Idd Thomma reminded him. “I only came along for the ride, as they say.”

“Yeah, I know. But you made it really cool, I mean, interesting. You know, the hotel in Aqaba, the camel ride, the camp-out...Without you, it wouldn't have been as fun.”

“Oh well, you know,” said Idd Thomma modestly. But he was beaming.

“Well, I just wanted you to know I had a good time,” said Thomas.

“Well, I did too,” said Idd Thomma, turning to give him a full smile.

Thomas smiled back.

Ninan was taking advantage of the moment to try to switch the music from the CD to the radio.

“Shu hadda?” said Idd Thomma, turning his full attention back to the front.

“What is this?”

“It is music, Idd Thomma,” said Ninan. “Cool music, as Thomas would say.”

“It is not, *cool*, it is loud and they moan too much.”

“Moan too much!” Ninan was outraged, but at the same time, Thomas could tell that he and his grandfather were enjoying the argument. “Your music is full of people groaning and singing about how life is hard...”

“But life is hard,” said Idd Thomma reasonably. “And when they sing about it, they sing nicely. They have real talent.”

“Real talent? *Real talent?*”

The radio had been turned off and the CDs were back on.

Thomas just shook his head and laughed to himself.

Although 'Ammi Mariam didn't know when they were coming back, she seemed to have a feast on stand-by. As soon as they had been hugged and kissed and welcomed back, and after they had all taken showers and after she had gathered up all their dusty clothes to be washed, they sat down in the kitchen to a meal of bread and hummus and olives and chicken and rice and three kinds of salad and some kind of cheesecake for dessert. It was wonderful and they all told her so.

She was pleased with their appreciation.

“It is not always easy to eat good food when traveling,” she said with the tone of a woman who has traveled and been disappointed.

Ninan glanced at his watch.

“I may be able to make it to an afternoon class,” he said, getting up from the table.

“Thanks Idd Thomma! I had a great time!” He gave them all a wave and headed out.

'Ammi Mariam shoosed Thoma and Idd Thomma out of her kitchen so that she could clean up.

“What now?” asked Idd Thomma, when he had settled into his chair. “A bit of TV?”

“If you want,” said Thomas. “But I was thinking of reading some more of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, especially since I've seen a lot of the places now.”

Idd Thomma nodded.

“Good idea. While it is all fresh in your mind, yes?”

They spent an afternoon in the living room, Idd Thomma with his Bible and Thomas with his book. 'Ammi Mariam kindly brought out a plate of cookies and some coffee in the late afternoon and joined them with her knitting. Thomas was so caught up in the stories of T.E. Lawrence and his Bedouins that he didn't even realize that it was getting dark outside.

'Ammi Mariam let him have some leftover chicken in the living room and by the time he was ready to go to bed, he had finished the book.

“Wow,” he said, putting it down and rubbing his eyes.

Idd Thomma was passing from between his bedroom and the bathroom.

“Good story?” he asked.

“Oh yeah! Really good! I can't believe I've been where all that happened!”

“Yes, that is very *cool*, is it not?” said Idd Thomma with a big grin.

## TUESDAY ~ SALAH AD-DIN & JOHN THE BAPTIST

“Think about it. It must have been someone in the apartment building. How else would they have been able to slip messages under the door if they were a prisoner? They probably had some excuse for stepping out but couldn't be gone for long,” said Thomas.

Ninan had stopped by at around lunchtime, after his classes. He was free for the rest of the day but could only stay for a few hours since he had some catching up to do. “Ammi Mariam had fed them some lentil soup for lunch and they were now talking in Thomas's room.

“But it is someone who thought they could make it out to the museum and who is able to get out to a bookstore,” mused Ninan. “I still think it is a young woman.”

They were speaking quietly at the kitchen table but Thomas peaked out into the living room to see if Idd Thomma had heard anything. He looked preoccupied with his Bible. ‘Ammi Mariam was out visiting a sick friend.

“We should find out more about the people who live here,” said Thomas. “Do you know any of them?”

Ninan shook his head.

“‘Ammi Mariam might be able to help us. You know, if you just talk casually and ask her a few questions,” he said.

Thomas nodded.

“I’ll do it at dinner.”

“Were there any notes while we were gone?”

Thomas shook his head.

“Ammi Mariam didn't say anything.”

“Well, it is hard to imagine that someone trapped in Wadi Rum would be able to make her way home before we got here.”

Thomas nodded.

“What I'm worried about is, did we do the right thing?”

“What do you mean?” asked Ninan.

“I mean, did we do enough? Someone needed help and we weren't able to help them.”

“Actually, we did a lot. We told the Desert Patrol. That man knows the area better than we do. If anything is happening, he will find out.”

“I guess you're right.”

“In any case, it is probably the end of the notes under the door.”

Thomas nodded.

“I wonder if we'll ever find out what it was all about?”

Ninan shrugged.

“Maybe not. In any case, why don't you come with me?” Ninan stood up. “There is a lot of El Sham you have not seen. I can take you on a quick tour before I have to do some studying.”

Idd Thomma gave Ninan permission to take Thomas out for awhile.

“Maybe you should make him take the bus back here,” suggested Idd Thomma. “It would help him learn his way around the city.”

Thomas was terrified at the thought.

“Yes,” said Ninan, as they headed for the door. “And then he would end up in Beirut.”

Once they were in the car, Ninan asked, “Do you want to see the tomb of Salah ad-Din?”

“Who?” said Thomas, tightening his seatbelt.

“You do not know who Salah ad-Din is?”

“Let me guess, he was Faisal's army commander?”

Ninan rolled his eyes as he pulled out into traffic.

“You are off by about 800 years.”

“Well, I've never heard of the guy.”

“Did you not see *Kingdom of Heaven*?” asked Ninan, as they reached an intersection and slowed down for the red light.

“Sure I did. The Crusades and all. Lots of cool sword fighting.”

“Saladin? It does not sound familiar?”

“Oh, was he the head of the Arabs...?”

Ninan nodded.

“And his grave is here in Damascus? Wow! You've got a lot of history!”

“Yes, we do,” said Ninan. “Actually, it is funny that you should mention Faisal. Salah ad-Din and Faisal were similar in many ways.”

“Oh really? How's that?”

“Well, one thing was that they were both Muslims but admired by Christians for their honour. The Crusaders slaughtered the Jews and Muslims when they took Jerusalem, but when Salah ad-Din took it back, he was merciful to the Christians. He also fought against foreign oppression, but in his days it was the Crusaders.”

“Everything about Middle Eastern history sounds like there have been a lot factions,” said Thomas.

Ninan nodded.

“That is why men like Faisal and Salah ad-Din are so treasured in our history. They have the strength to hold us all together for awhile, even if it does not last.”

Saladin's tomb was in the Old City. Ninan found a parking spot near the Citadel and they entered by one of the gates.

It was a short walk through a souk to the small white building with a red dome.

“What's that over there?” asked Thomas, pointing to an elaborate, large building down the road. There were many people hurrying in and out of its gate, as well as many tourists with their cameras, milling around and taking photos. By comparison, the building they stood in front of was quiet.



“The Ummayyad Mosque,” said Ninan, glancing up from the sign that gave the hours of Saladin's tomb. “Very impressive, yes? We will go there next. Our admission for the tomb includes the mosque.”

They paid their admission and entered into the tomb. The walls were striped-- a muted black and red --with accents of Islamic artwork

The tomb itself was white and ornate with an Arabic inscription.

“What does it say?” asked Thomas.

Ninan read the inscription.

“Oh Allah, be satisfied with this soul. Open to him the gates of paradise, the last conquest for which he hoped.”

“That sounds noble.”

Ninan nodded.

“There is actually a Lawrence of Arabia story connected with this tomb.”

“Oh yeah? Tell me.”



They were the only ones in the tomb so there was no hurry.

“Well, the German Kaiser visited Syria, in 1898, and he toured Jerusalem and Damascus...”

“Oh, that's right. Jerusalem was part of Syria back then.”

“Exactly,” nodded Ninan. “And I think he contributed some money to have this tomb fixed up a bit. Then he left a bronze wreath here on the tomb. Lawrence removed it and donated it to the War Museum in England.”

“Why?”

Ninan shrugged.

“Maybe he thought it did not fit the décor.”

“I guess England and Germany were enemies even then.”

“I guess so. Now let us go see the Mosque before I have to get home.”

The Mosque was both a place of worship and a place for tourists.

“Idd Thomma took me here once,” said Ninan, as they stood in the vast courtyard. “He told me that in Paul's day this was where the temple to Jupiter was.”

“Wow, cool,” said Thomas looking up at the minarets and down at the marble floor.

“The fountain there,” said Ninan pointing, “is said to be halfway between Istanbul and Mecca.”



Heading towards the most spectacular of the buildings, Ninan said, “This is the prayer hall. It has a lot of beautiful mosaics on it.”

With the sun sparkling on its exterior, the mosaics were especially impressive. Since the Muslim faith prohibited depicting animals and people, there were lots of natural scenes – fields, rivers, trees, and elegant cities.

“It is supposed to be Paradise,” said Ninan as they looked up.

“Yeah, I can see that,” said Thomas.

“We can go into the prayer hall and see where John the Baptist was buried.”

“Really?”

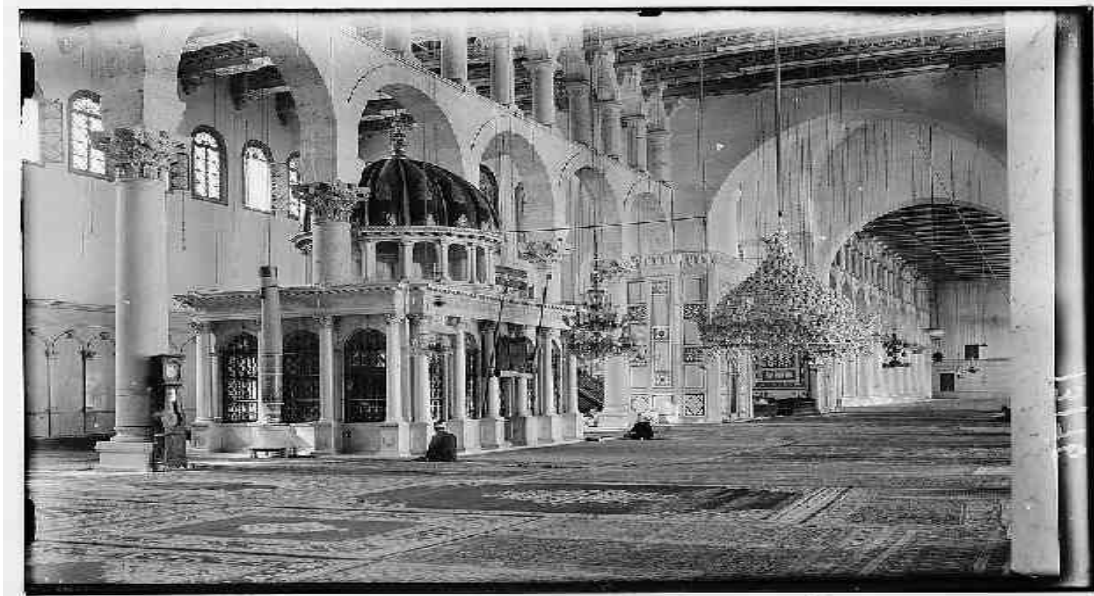
Ninan nodded and kicked off his shoes and then lined them up with all the others. Thomas followed his example.

The interior wasn't as dramatic as the exterior, but there was a feeling of peace and a sense of being away from the hustle of the city. Ninan led Thomas to an elaborate marble monument that paid tribute to John the Baptist.

“I don't understand why John the Baptist is in a Muslim mosque,” whispered Thomas.

“Well, for the Muslims, Jesus is a prophet so John the Baptist is important too. They just don't believe that he was the son of Allah.”





Come!" said Ninan. "I will show you one more thing before we head back." He grabbed his cousin's arm and they hurried back out to find their shoes.

They exited the mosque and followed a street that ran parallel to the walls of the mosque's exterior. After the peace of the prayer hall, the streets seemed particularly crowded. The stores here were selling gold and the tourists were haggling over prices. A lot of shops also had beautiful woodwork. Thomas had just enough time to notice a particular chessboard that he thought his father might like as a gift when Ninan pulled him into a doorway.

"What's this?" asked Thomas.

"This is from the days of the Romans," explained Ninan. "And look up at that."

Thomas looked up at the writing above the blocked doorway.

"It's not Arabic," he observed.



“That is true,” said Ninan. “It is Greek. Idd Thomma showed me this too. It says something like, Your kingdom, Christ, is an everlasting kingdom and your dominion endures throughout all generations.”

“Wow,” said Thomas. “Why is it still here? I mean, why hasn't someone destroyed it...”

“Oh, it is not offensive to talk about Mariam's son. And some people even believe that Jesus will return but that he will destroy all the Christians for their disbelief and for adding gods to Allah. But what is interesting to me about this is it is a message from the early Christians. This was an entrance to the Temple of Jupiter and yet, here is this message.”

“That *is* interesting,” agreed Thomas. “I guess it's like walking down Straight Street. It's part of our heritage.”

Ninan nodded.

“Exactly.” He looked at his watch. “Now I must get you back. Tayyib? Agreed?”

“Tayyib,” said Thomas.

Ninan dropped Thomas off in front of the apartment and with a wave promised to call tomorrow.

Thomas found Idd Thomma and 'Ammi Mariam in the living room, drinking coffee and half watching a cooking show on TV. Idd Thomma switched it off when Thomas sat down on the couch.

“Did you have a good time?” 'Ammi Mariam asked.

“Oh, yes,” said Thomas. “I saw Salah Al-Din's tomb and that big mosque.”

“Ummayad Mosque,” nodded Idd Thomma.

“I want to go back sometime. I saw a great chessboard that would be cool to get for Dad.”

“Your dad still plays chess?” asked Idd Thomma, looking pleased.

“Uh, sometimes. Only when we have company and they play.”

“You do not play chess?” asked Idd Thomma, surprised.

“I don't know how.”

“Your father did not teach you?”

“Well, he tried once. But I was pretty young and I just didn't get it.”

“Well,” said Idd Thomma, standing up and going over to a china cabinet that had a drawer below. He opened it up and pulled out a chessboard and a bag of pieces. “We will fix that. I taught your father to play chess. I will teach you.”

'Ammi Mariam smiled and stood up, picking up the small coffee cups.

“I will leave you men to your game,” she said, going into the kitchen.

“I think I know how to set up the board,” said Thomas, as his grandfather handed him his white pieces. He got his bishops and knights mixed up, but his grandfather was pleased that he at least knew the names of all the pieces.

By the time 'Ammi Mariam called them for dinner, he had a pretty good idea of how to play. At one point he had even thought that he was close to winning, but Idd Thomma was too wily for that. He didn't believe in letting people win so that they'd feel good about themselves.

'Ammi Mariam served them a delicious meal of lamb and eggplant with a side-dish of spicy tomatoes and potatoes. Thomas had no problem getting her to talk about their neighbours in the apartment building.

"Are a lot of the people in the building Christian?" he asked between mouthfuls.

"The lady above us is," said 'Ammi Mariam. "She is older and lives by herself. But the family across from us is Muslim. They have a full house. There are four children, and of course, parents and I think his parents live with them as well as her mother. Her mother and I meet a lot when we go shopping. She is the one who likes to cook I think."

"How old are the children?"

"Oh, I do not know..." 'Ammi Mariam paused to think.

"I mean, are they my age?"

"Oh no! Very young."

So they probably had nothing to do with the notes.

"Are there many people my age here?"

"Not in this apartment. But if you want to meet more young people, Ninan probably knows a lot of people..."

"Oh no!" Thomas assured her. "I was just wondering about the people in the building. I don't need to meet anyone."

"If you want to see everyone in the apartments," said Idd Thomma, "all you have to do is sit out on the balcony after dinner. A lot of people sit out there when the weather is nice."

As a result of this discussion, they all had their after dinner coffee out on the balcony. Idd Thomma was right. A lot of people were sitting outside enjoying the cool night air, many of them with a cup of coffee.

Idd Thomma called out a few greetings to those around them and even as far away as across the courtyard. Many conversations were taking place between the balconies, though all in Arabic.

"Anything interesting happening?" asked Thomas. He had a feeling of being at a complete disadvantage as far as clearing up the mystery of who had pushed the notes under the door.

"Oh yes," said Idd Thomma, settling back in his chair. "Much news. Much news."

"Like what?"

"Fighting in Beirut."

"Fighting in Beirut? I thought that was all in the 70's."

Idd Thomma shook his head.

"No. Now. Hezbollah. You have heard of them?"

"Uh, I guess so. They're in the news and stuff."

"Yes, they like to shoot rockets at Israel."

"Oh, that's right. I think I know who you mean."

"They are also in government and they want to run Lebanon. Right now there is fighting in Beirut. Hezbollah and the army are battling for Beirut."

"Wow! That's really close to here, isn't it?"

Idd Thomma nodded.

“But it is not here,” said 'Ammi Mariam, making what seemed to be a significant point.

“But do my parents know about all of this?” asked Thomas. “I mean, would they have let me come if they knew there was a war nearby?”

“Yes, they would have because this is your home.”

Thomas thought about that. This *was* his home. If other Arabs could continue to live here with fighting close by, it was silly of him to think he was too important to live in an imperfect world. Was their blood any less precious than his?

“Yeah, I guess you're right,” he said, leaning back in his chair and sipping his coffee.

## WEDNESDAY ~ CHESS & COFFEE

When Thomas came out of his bedroom, the first thing he noticed was the piece of paper that had been pushed under the door.

He could hear the water running in the bathroom and 'Ammi Mariam singing in the kitchen. He hurried to pick it up before anyone else noticed it.

Meet me on the balcony tomorrow at 12:00.

That's all it said.

While his grandfather was in the bathroom, he hurried to the phone and called Ninan.

Ninan sounded like he had been woken from a deep sleep, but he wasn't upset when he heard the news.

"But the balcony?!" said Thomas into the phone. "I mean, that's a joke, right?"

"No," said Ninan, excitedly. "It just confirms that the person is close by. You have seen the number of balconies that look down into the courtyard."

"Yeah, we were out there last night."

"And the girl is going to be outside on her balcony at 12:00. You realize what this means...?"

"No, what?"

"We may have to be prepared to protect her."

"You mean, like hide her in the apartment?"

"No, the apartment would not be safe. You see, if her relatives were looking for her, they would just kick the door down and that would get Idd Thomma into trouble. No, I think we may have to get in the car and drive..."

"That's pretty serious."

"You may have to be prepared to take her back to Kanadaa with you..."

"What?"

"Just kidding," said Ninan. "Still, it is worth thinking about, yes? I think she is hoping that because you are from, maybe America, that you can take her somewhere safe."

"I guess if she's pretty, I could always make the ultimate sacrifice and marry her. Then she could be a Canadian, right?"

"You are a real hero, Thomas," said Ninan. "Now, I will get there tomorrow as soon as I can."

"Make sure you have a full tank of gas," said Thomas.

They said their goodbyes and hung up just as Idd Thomma came out of the bathroom.

"Was that the rascal, Ninan?" asked his grandfather.

Thomas nodded.

"Is he keeping up with his studies?" It was his grandfather's way of making sure their trip hadn't set Ninan back with his schoolwork.

"Yeah, he seems to be OK. He's coming over tomorrow."

"Then you are free today?"

Thomas nodded. He expected his grandfather to announce that they would be visiting some significant sight in Damascus.

"Then we will start your Arabic lesson today. Sit! Sit!"

Thomas sat.

"Now, first we will say good morning. Sabaah al-khayr."

"Sabaah al-khayr," repeated Thomas. The kh part of khayr tickled his throat.

"Now, if I say Sabaah al-khayr to you, you can reply, sabaah an-noor."

"Sabaah an-noor," repeated Thomas.

"Sabaah is morning," explained Idd Thomma. "Al-khayr is the good. An-noor is the light."

"Morning the good. Morning the light," said Thomas.

"Na'am," said Idd Thomma, pleased. "Yes."

Idd Thomma would have gone on but 'Ammi Mariam called them to a breakfast of bread, yogurt and a spice dip.

The Arabic lesson carried on after breakfast and Thomas learned how to say, good evening, I would like a coffee and how much does that cost?

"Good," said Idd Thomma, standing up. "Now we will go to the Old City and buy that chessboard and you can do the talking."

He should have been apprehensive but he just shook his head and grinned. What's the worst that he could happen? He could accidentally come home with a camel instead of a chessboard.

Again, they took the bus.

Although Thomas was lost in the Old City, Idd Thomma seemed to have no problem finding the shop once he knew it was across from the Greek inscription about Christ.

"Yes," he said examining some of the chessboards. "Your father will like this very much. Now, which one will you get?"

"I like this one," said Thomas, picking up one that had chess pieces that were more detailed than the others. The pawns actually looked like little knights.

The shop owner was moving closer to them.

"Do you remember what to say?"

Thomas nodded.

"Be-dish hadda?"

"Close enough. Go ahead."

"Be-dish hadda?"

The man named an amount.

Idd Thomma muttered something that sounded like "hadda mublugh kebir".

"Hadda mublugh kebir," announced Thomas. "What did I just say?" he whispered.

"That amount too big," said Idd Thomma.

The shop keeper said something else.

"La," said Idd Thomma, shaking his head. Now he was talking to the shopkeeper himself. He named a price.

The shopkeeper said something emphatic.

Idd Thomma replied with matching vigour.

After a little bit more back and forth, a price was agreed upon and Idd Thomma signaled Thomas to pay for his chessboard.

"Now," said Idd Thomma, after the chessboard and pieces had been wrapped up and were under Thomas's arm, "you will order yourself coffee. Remember how to say it?"

"Bewb ishrub shwayet ahwa."

Idd Thomma shrugged.

"I guess they will know what you mean."

They returned to the coffee house on Straight Street. When the waiter came, Thomas ordered his coffee.

"Ana kaman," said Idd Thomma. "Me too," he translated for Thomas.

"Now, get out that chessboard and we will break it in," said Idd Thomma, after their coffees had arrived.

Thomas pulled the chessboard and pieces out of their paper bag and they set up a game. Pretty soon, they had a crowd of older men watching. It kind of made him nervous, but he reminded himself that it was all for fun and winning wasn't the point. But as it happened, he *did* win.

"You let me win!" he said to Idd Thomma.

Idd Thomma shook his head.

"You won all on your own. Your dad is a good player. You must have inherited his talent."

He had to come to Syria to find out that his dad was a good chess player.

They played another game and this time Idd Thomma won. After Thomas had put away the chessboard and pieces, Idd Thomma suggested they get some kebabs from a street vendor before heading back.

They ate the kebabs as they walked.

"Uh, Idd Thomma?" asked Thomas. "Do you think we could stop off at a bookstore near the Thomas Gate?"

"Why, sure," said Idd Thomma. "You need a book?"

"Well, I was sort of thinking it would be cool to read another book about the Arab Revolt. You know, I read *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*..."

"Excellent idea," said Idd Thomma. "Near Bab Thouma, you said?"

Once Idd Thomma got them to Bab Thouma, Thomas was able to find the bookstore.

"Now," said Idd Thomma, browsing a table. "We will not be too ambitious and get you anything in Arabic, yes? At least not now."

Idd Thomma moved to a shelf of second-hand books. Thomas kept his eyes open for anything in English.

"Here! How about this one?"

Idd Thomma held up a dark green volume.

"*With Lawrence in Arabia*," read Thomas.

"It is a classic," explained Idd Thomma. "It was written by a reporter who visited Lawrence in the desert."

"OK, sounds good," said Thomas. "Tayyib. Agreed."

Idd Thomma beamed.

## THURSDAY ~ TWO BALCONIES

"I'm really nervous about this," said Thomas. "I mean, this is it. We may have to do something big..."

Ninan nodded. He looked at his watch.

"Fifteen minutes."

They were in Thomas's room. Ninan walked over to the small window and looked down into the courtyard and then surveyed all the balconies.

"No one there," he reported. "Except for some children kicking a ball. But it is probably not them. Too young to write notes, I think."

"What about..." Thomas lowered his voice, "Idd Thomma? What's he going to say when we suddenly dash out of the apartment and then disappear for a few days if we have to? I mean, say there's this girl signaling to us from another balcony and then we meet her downstairs and she's got her bag packed and she wants us to drive her to the Mediterranean so she can catch a boat to freedom..."

"We will have to tell him we are going somewhere..." Ninan thought hard. "Maybe to Crac des Chevaliers. It is a long drive from here. We would be gone overnight. It is a Crusader castle. Very well preserved. In fact, someone should take you there..."

"Yes, but what if it's like Wadi Rum and he wants to come along?"

"OK, something not so interesting. I could say we were going to Homs to visit our cousin, Bulus. No, he would want to come along for that...Let me think...Maybe I could say I am taking you to my home for the night. That way he will not worry and it will give us a day or two..."

"Except that he might phone your parents for some reason..."

"You know," said Ninan. "Why should we not just tell him the truth? He will understand. And I do not want to deceive him."

"You know, I think you're right. He *is* pretty understanding. He's actually quite cool."

Ninan nodded.

"Let us go tell him everything now." Ninan looked at his watch again. "We have twelve minutes. That way he will be ready if we need to do anything suddenly."

They headed out into the living room. But Idd Thomma wasn't there. 'Ammi Mariam was making lunch. When they went into the kitchen she offered them some pies to try. They were small rectangles filled with spinach, nuts and spices.

"Mmmm!" said Ninan with one in his mouth and two in his hand. "You are the best cook 'Ammi Mariam!"

'Ammi Mariam looked pleased but she still shooed them out of her kitchen so that she could finish making lunch.

"He must be in the bathroom," said Ninan when they returned to an empty living room. "Oh well. We are five minutes early but we might as well go out on the balcony."

Thomas agreed.

Idd Thomma was on the balcony, sitting with a cup of coffee.

"Oh, Idd Thomma, there you are," said Ninna. "We were looking for you."

"Yes?" said Idd Thomma, looking up.



“Well, it is like this,” said Ninan taking a deep breath. “We have ourselves a situation.”

“Oh? What is that?”

“Remember that note that was pushed under the door the second day I was here?” Thomas jumped in.

“Note?”

“You know, it was a piece of paper. You told me to pick it up in case it was 'Ammi Mariam's shopping list.”

Idd Thomma thought back.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “I think I remember that.”

“Well,” said Thomas, looking at Ninan. “What we didn't tell you was that there were more notes.”

“More notes?”

They nodded.

Between the two of them, they summarized the activities of the last week – the visit to the museum, the bookstore, Maysalun Pass, and then how they had talked to the Desert Patrol and finally, about the note yesterday that had told them to be on the balcony.

Idd Thomma nodded.

“Is it OK?” asked Ninan. “Did we do the right thing?”

Idd Thomma nodded again.

“Oh yes. It is very important to help people in need.”

“But we didn't,” said Thomas. “We didn't help anyone! We completely failed!”

“But you are here now,” said Idd Thomma.

Ninan glanced at his watch and looked all around the courtyard.

“But there is no one else, Idd Thomma!”

Idd Thomma smiled.

“There is me,” he said.

“Of course there is you,” said Ninan, still looking around. “I mean, where is the person who wrote those notes?”

“I am right here,” said Idd Thomma.

Thomas and Ninan stared at him.

“You wrote the notes?” said Thomas.

“Of course,” said Idd Thomma taking a sip of his coffee. “I was the one you helped.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ninan.

“It is my job to pass on our family history to Thomma,” explained Idd Thomma. “But you think that I don't know that everyone makes fun of me for being proud of our Arabic heritage?” Idd Thomma's eyes sparkled. “That first day you were here and Ninan is hitting you when I start talking and ‘Ammi Mariam isn't letting me tell my story... So, I could see I had to do something to make it a little more interesting for you. That's when I made my plan...”

Thomas laughed.

“It *was* a good idea.”

“And I made sure that there was a lot of Arabic writing so that this rascal, Ninan, would have to help out.”

“You know though,” said Thomas thoughtfully, “there is one thing I’m not sure about. My parents decided I had to come here when I asked them about our name. And our name is Lawrence. Were we...?” The pieces started to fall in place.

Idd Thomma stood up.

“You and I are both named for the great Lurens. What do you think of that?” Idd Thomma ruffled his hair as if he were a little boy.

“Wow,” said Thomas. “I guess I’m really proud.”

“You should be. You should be proud of your great-grandfather and your Arab heritage. You see, my father was so proud of having fought with Lurens that he changed his name to Lawrence. And then that became your surname. We have the name Thomma because that was Lawrence’s name also.”

“T.E. Lawrence,” said Thomas, getting it.

“Come,” said Idd Thomma, opening the door to go back inside. “We will eat ‘Ammi Mariam’s lunch and then there is one more place I want to show you.”

After lunch, they set out on the bus.

“It is safer than Ninan’s driving,” explained Idd Thomma.

Much to their surprise, Idd Thomma took them to Martyr’s Square. This time, with a lot of fancy footwork and Idd Thomma’s determination, they crossed the road to stand in its centre.



“See that building over there?” Idd Thomma pointed.

Ninan and Thomas nodded.

“I think it is the Ministry of Information,” said Ninan.

“It is now,” said Idd Thomma, “But when Faisal came to Damascus, it was the City Hall. You see that balcony?” They looked up. “That was where he was crowned the King of Syria.”

Thomas looked up at the balcony and could imagine the young Arab king, both a warrior and a peace-maker.

“Imagine the crowds cheering as Faisal rode through the streets on his horse,” said Idd Thomma. “Imagine your great grandfather here among them, so proud to be an Arab and to have an Arab king. A hundred and one shots were fired. A new Arab flag was run up the flagpole.”

Despite the traffic and the din, Thomas could imagine it.

“But Idd Thomma,” he said. “What happened to Faisal? After the French came into Syria, I mean?”

“He had to stay in Palestine for awhile. Then he moved to Italy. But while France had a mandate for Syria the British had the mandate for Iraq. They needed an Arab king so they asked Faisal if he wanted to go to Iraq.”

“And he did?”

Idd Thomma nodded.

“Yes, he was King of Iraq from 1921 until he died in 1933. You will have to read all about that on your own since I cannot send you to Iraq at this time.” Idd Thomma's eyes twinkled.

Thomas nodded.

“I will. I will read about it, Idd Thomma.”

“I hope your stay in Syria is not too dull after all this excitement,” said Idd Thomma.

“Oh no,” Thomas assured him. “Besides, I'll be busy.”

“Busy?”

“Yes. I've got to learn Arabic, don't I?”

Idd Thomma's eyes widened.

“You're going to have to teach me everyday,” continued Thomas, “and then we'll have to go out so I can practice, right?”

Idd Thomma looked like he was going to burst with pride.

“And, of course, I'll be taking him around to see everything,” said Ninan. “Like starting with that cafe over there. Best baclava in the world.” The three men started walking in the direction that Ninan had pointed. “And of course we have a lot to see. Like Crac de Chevaliers. He must see a crusader castle, yes?”

“Oh yes!” said Idd Thomma. “In fact, our namesake, Lurens, came to Syria long before the war to study the Crusader castles. Did you know that Thomma?”

Thomas shook his head.

“Well, then we must tell you all about it. You see, the Crusaders came to our land in 1097. The first city they took here was Antioch, and let me tell you...”

The three men headed back across Martyr's Square.

~ THE END ~

In his Foreward to *With Lawrence in Arabia*, Lowell Thomas writes the following:

“Another ‘bazaar rumour’ that has been going the rounds is to the effect that Colonel Lawrence has renounced Christianity and turned Mohammedan. This also is the offspring of some feverish imagination! From what I saw of Lawrence I rather believe that he is a better Christian than most of us. In his introduction to a new edition of Doughty’s classic *Arabia Deserta* he says of that great Arabian traveler: ‘He was book-learned, but simple in the arts of living, trustful of every man, very silent. He was the first Englishman they had met. He predisposed them to give a chance to other men of his race, because they found him honourable and good. So he broke a road for his religion. They say that he seemed proud only of being Christian, and yet never crossed their faith.’ The tribute he pays to Doughty might be applied equally appropriately to himself.”



Winston Churchill, T.E. Lawrence, Emir Abdullah (A leader in the Arab Revolt and Faisal's brother; ruler of Trans-Jordan), Jerusalem, 1921

*In memory of Faisal bin Al Hussein, the last king of Syria and first king of Iraq  
Born May 20, 1883, Taif, al Hijaz  
Died September 8, 1933*

