

The Pearl







The Pearl

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STACEY
INTERNATIONAL

The Pearl

published by

Stacey International
128 Kensington Church Street
London W8 4BH
Tel: 020 7221 7166 Fax: 020 7792 9288
E-mail: info@stacey-international.co.uk
Website: www.stacey-international.co.uk

ISBN: 978 1 906768 33 1

CIP Data: A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

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State of Qatar

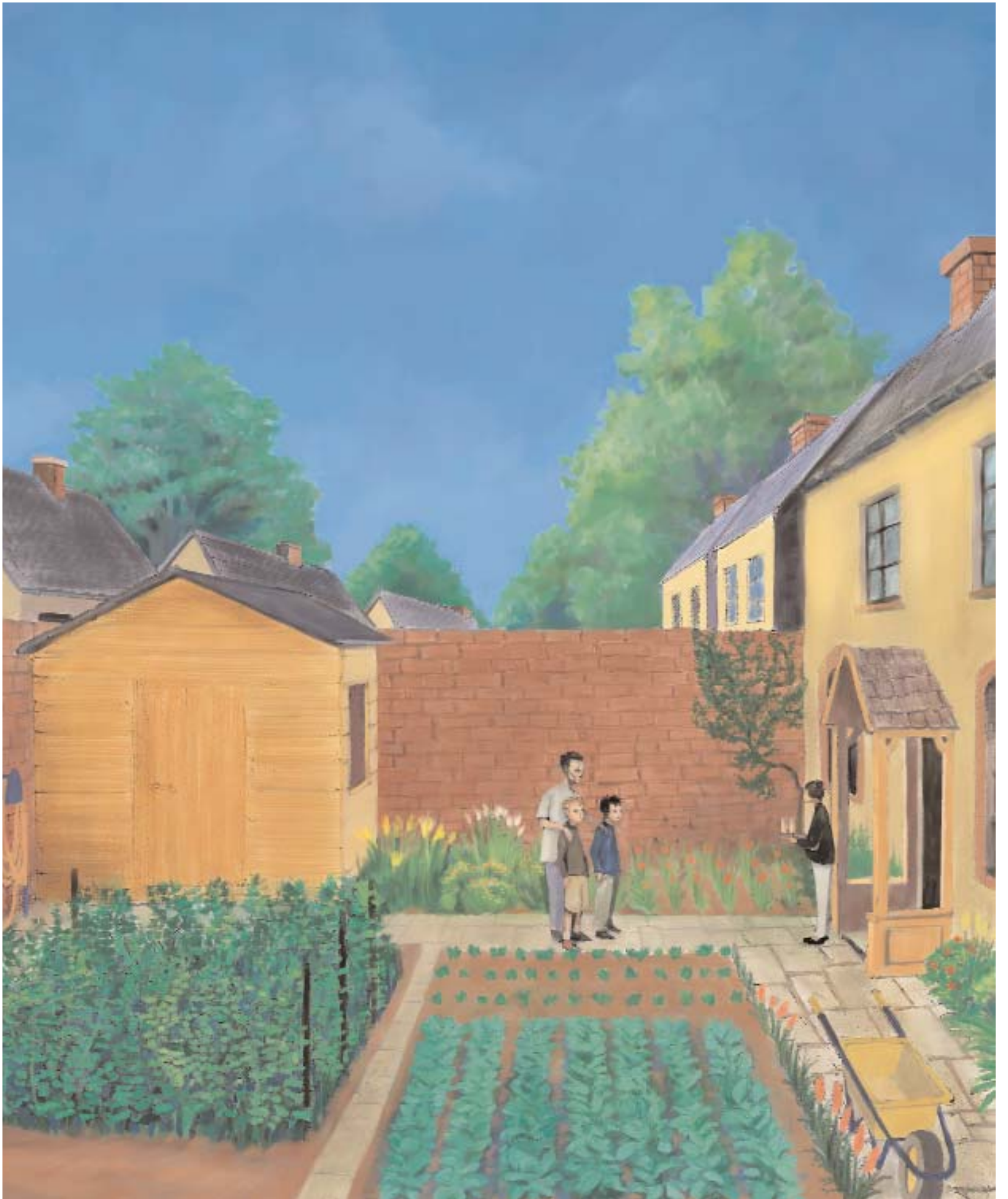
1 3 5 7 9 0 8 6 4 2

Printed in the UAE

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CHAPTER 1

The Rage

‘Agh!’ Jack was rolling around the mat holding his head in agony. ‘Peter-san!’ yelled Mr Yamamoto, moving swiftly to check Jack for injuries.

Peter Dobbs sat on the other side of the mat, his face contorted in anger and his chest pounding as he breathed heavily and deeply. Having established that Jack was more-or-less fine, Yamamoto was now moving towards Peter. Peter dropped his head onto his heaving chest. He knew exactly what Yamamoto would say, and he didn’t want to hear it, any more than he wanted to make eye contact with his teacher.

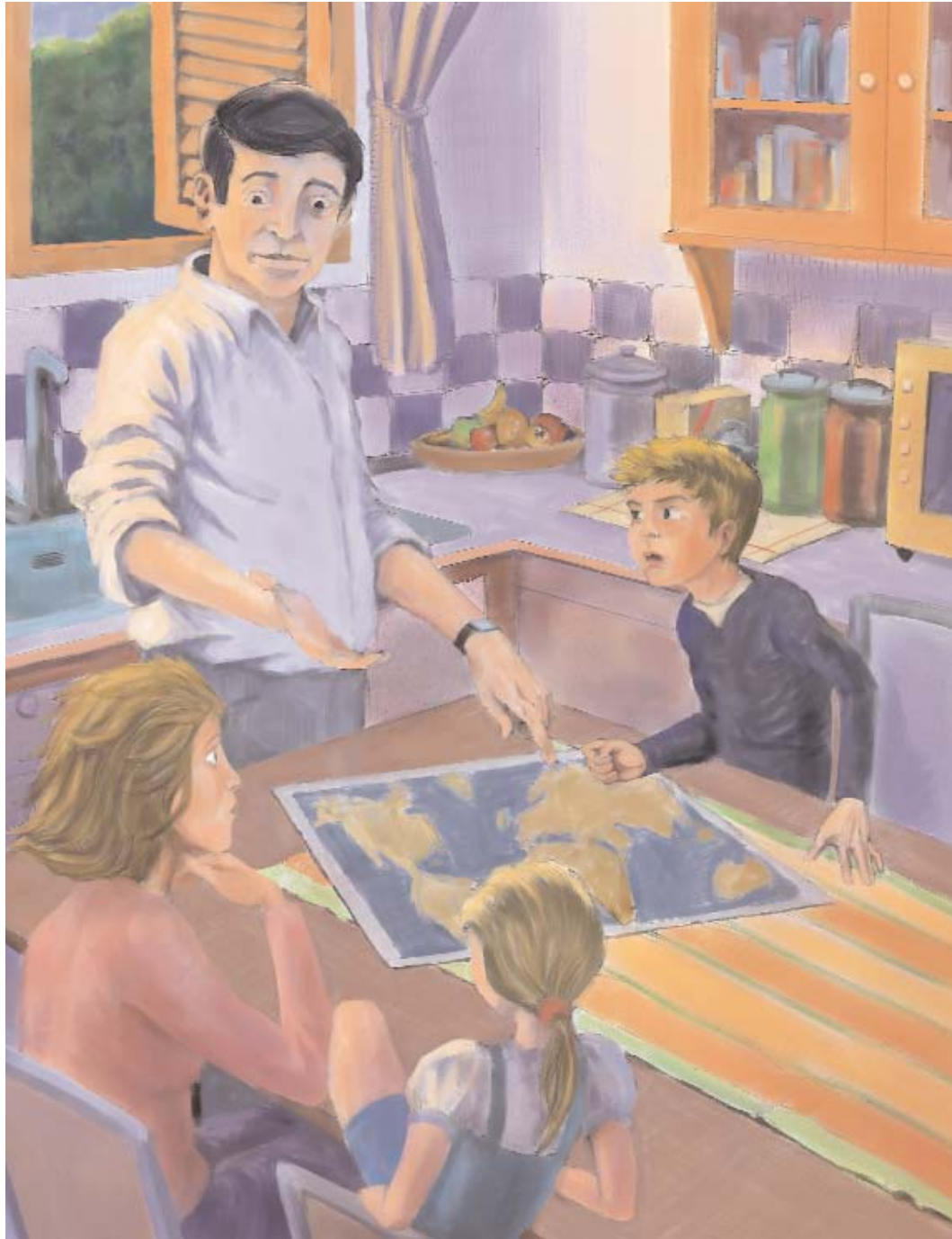
‘Peter-san,’ said Mr Yamamoto in his level, calm tone, a tone that Peter knew was a cover for the anger that the usually mind-mannered Yamamoto was feeling. ‘Peter – Karate means *empty hand* . . . not hand *holding shoe*.’

‘His fault,’ Peter muttered under his breath and nodding in the direction of Jack, who had sufficiently recovered to sit up and glare in Peter’s direction. What had actually happened was a blur that was still buzzing around in Peter’s head, trying to search for some sort of logic. Jack had barely taken up the *hachi-dachi* – the ‘ready stance’ – before Peter had launched himself headlong at his pal, drop-kicking him with such force that it pushed both boys off the mat. Peter landed in the jumble of his own clothing, instinctively grabbed a shoe and launched himself back at Jack, hitting him blindly across his head. Even in his anger Peter now realised that this was totally unacceptable. He’d be lucky if Yamamoto ever let him back into the dojo, which was in reality a shed at the bottom of a garden full of vegetables that Yamamoto proudly grew and happily gave to his students at the end of each lesson. There would be no cabbage to take home today, Peter found himself thinking. Right now Peter couldn’t care less. He just wanted to get out of there and as far away as possible. He grabbed his clothes and ran from the dojo, up the garden path and out through the gate, ignoring Mrs Yamamoto who was standing, smiling and proffering a large glass of freshly-made apple juice; this was as much a part of the ritual of his visits to Yamamoto’s dojo as the bow at the end of each lesson – something else he hadn’t bothered to do. As the gate slammed shut behind him, Peter was vaguely aware of Jack calling after him.

‘What was that all about?’ his one-time best friend was shouting, adding, ‘You’re mad, you are!’

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Peter wasn't mad – but he was absolutely furious, and – as Peter saw it at least – it was all Jack's fault. Jack had deliberately goaded him. As they had stepped onto the mat to begin their karate lesson inside Yamamoto's pine-clad garden shed dojo, Jack had committed the cardinal sin. He had uttered the 'Q' word.



CHAPTER 2

The Announcement

A week earlier the Q word – Qatar – was something Peter was totally unaware of. He had spent his eleven years of life without even knowing of Qatar's existence. Likewise Qatar knew nothing about Peter Dobbs from England. Soon they would meet for the first time. 'Not if I can help it,' Peter had promised himself.

It all began the previous Thursday:

'I've got some *wonderful* news,' Peter's Dad told the assembled family. They had all been summoned to the kitchen for what Mum liked to call a 'Family Conference'. This usually meant getting told off. As Peter dawdled down the stairs at a pace that a lazy snail would have been proud to achieve, he ran through all the potential topics for the 'conference'. *Untidy bedroom*: was his room untidy? It was a matter of opinion. In Peter's opinion it wasn't, but his mother would almost certainly disagree. *Use of the phone*: another contentious issue. His parents usually went through the phone bill with the thoroughness of a private eye, detecting precisely who had made which call, why and for how long. Peter's response was always the same: if his parents let him have a mobile phone then he wouldn't need to use the land line. His parents didn't agree. They even blocked him out of the internet. 'They're not even living in the twenty first century,' Peter muttered to himself as he continued to snail his way downstairs.

'Peter – we're waiting!' his mother called out.

'I'm in the toilet,' Peter lied.

'Well hurry up,' his Dad told him.

'I hope you haven't got the light on,' his mother chipped in.

That was another subject for a Family Conference – electricity. 'Do you have any idea how much electricity costs?' his father would ask. Of course not, Peter thought to himself. The cost of electricity didn't concern the average eleven year-old. There was plenty of time to find out about such things when he was an adult, by which time the price would have changed anyway. The conference can't be about anything important Peter decided, as he reached the bottom of the stairs and the end of his delaying tactic. He went into the kitchen, blissfully unaware that the information he was about to receive would change his life forever.

'Have you washed your hands?' Peter's eight-year-old sister sneered.

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‘Catherine!’ her Mother warned. ‘Catherine’ winced. She preferred to be known as *Cat*, or *The Cat* in moments of self-delusion.

‘Now . . . everyone . . .’ their father began, pausing to ensure that he had everyone’s attention. Even the goldfish appeared to stop swimming around its tank, come to the front of the glass just above the little Chinese bridge, and stare open-mouthed. The fact that a goldfish’s memory is so short that it would have forgotten everything Dad had said within minutes didn’t seem to matter.

‘I have an important announcement,’ Dad announced. ‘Important Announcement,’ Peter thought: this sounded like it might be bigger than untidy rooms; bigger than electricity; bigger even than forgetting to feed the goldfish. What could it be, Peter wondered?

‘I’ve been promoted,’ Dad told them proudly, puffing out his chest while trying – unsuccessfully – to hold in his expanding stomach. So what, thought Peter? So Dad gets more money – it won’t mean more pocket money. Dad was tight with money.

‘And we’re moving to Qatar,’ Dad added with a beam of delight, pausing to allow the Important Announcement to have its full impact. The response was not quite what he’d hoped for.

‘Isn’t that wonderful news?’ Mum said, smiling at Dad with a grin that threatened to split her face in half.

‘WHAT?!?’ Peter exclaimed in horror.

‘Who’s got catarrh?’ Cat asked, totally misunderstanding.

The rest of the conversation blurred into insignificance, as Peter’s brain raced, frantically trying to grab the implications of Dad’s Important Announcement as they whizzed through it. After sifting through various potential scenarios, it all seemed to boil down to one thing: he would be moving away from everything he loved, everything he cherished: his whole world. As Peter saw it, his future was going to be bleak and miserable. The goldfish swam away from the glass, through the ruined castle and past the plastic fern. Dad’s Important Announcement had no implications for him: as he saw it his future was going to be the same as it was now. Although neither Peter nor the fish knew it, they were both completely wrong.

CHAPTER 3

The Departure

‘Do you want my fish?’ Peter asked.
‘Only if I can have your chips as well,’ Jack replied, smiling his wicked, crooked smile.

It was their sense of humour that had first attracted the two friends to each other. Jack could always be relied on to cheer Peter up, whatever happened. Whatever happened that is except his departure to Qatar. This time Jack didn’t even try: he’d learnt the hard way that the ‘Q’ word was totally off limits.

‘I didn’t get brain damage by the way,’ Jack told him, referring to the incident at Yamamoto’s dojo. ‘You know – from being thumped by your shoe.’

‘How would you tell?’ Peter joked, despite himself. Jack smiled. He knew his pal well enough to realise that this was a sort-of apology. Jack sort-of accepted it. The two pals were sitting in the corner of the school dining hall, trying to ignore the sound of hundreds of shouting secondary school children. The noise never seemed to stop. Peter found himself wondering how any of them ever managed to eat their lunch. Not that Peter felt like eating. Ever since Dad’s Important Announcement, Peter’s appetite had taken a nosedive. It didn’t help that Mum had taken to giving him money to buy school dinners that tasted as though they had never actually been real food. They were also surviving on take-away food at home, as the pots and pans had been packed and put in storage. It didn’t occur to Peter that, if his parents were holding on to the pots it probably meant that they were planning to return to Britain at some point. It didn’t occur to him because he was too absorbed by his dislike for this strange place he knew nothing about – this strange place that he firmly believed was about to unwittingly ruin his life. Peter prodded his school dinner unenthusiastically with a plastic fork as he looked around the dining hall. It was disgusting. Even allowing for the fact that most of the children there had the table manners of raging buffalo, the hall itself had definitely seen better days. The paint was peeling, the walls were cracked. Even the graffiti looked as though it could do with a lick of paint. The building should have been condemned years ago, but it continued to languish on ‘death row’ until the Government saw fit to replace it. But, for all that, this had been Peter’s educational home for almost a year. After a shaky start he now felt very settled. But he was about to be uprooted and sent – where? Somewhere far worse, probably.

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Somewhere without his best pal Jack. I'm really going to miss Jack, Peter thought despondently.

'Are you going to karate tonight?' Jack was saying. 'Oi! Dozy! Are you going to karate?' Peter was shaken out of his thoughts by his friend's voice.

'What?' he replied, 'Oh . . . er . . . I don't know. I don't think . . .'

He was about to say that he didn't think that Mr Yamamoto would want him to. Jack seemed to read his thoughts.

'The Yamamotos are really going to miss you, you know.'

Before he could expand on this, the school bell rang for afternoon lessons. The two boys gathered up the debris of their lunch and headed for their respective classes via the bins. As they parted Jack quipped: 'oh – and bring cleaner shoes tonight – I got a bit of mud in my eye last time!' Peter smiled sadly as he headed for class. He'd never have another friend as great as Jack, he decided.

CHAPTER 4

The Journey

Airports are always intimidating, Peter believed. The idea of flying seemed to have an impact on Cat's bladder and from the time they entered the terminal at Gatwick Airport to the time their plane left the runway, Cat had been to the toilet six times. If she wasn't visiting the toilet she was asking for a drink, or bouncing around excitedly. Peter loved flying, despite the fact that he had only ever done it a couple of times. It wasn't the flying that was bothering him – it was the fact that the journey was only one way. Dad, not usually known for his sensitive side, seemed to sense Peter's discomfort.

'Peter,' he said, approaching his son, 'if Mum looks after the hand luggage do you want to come to the duty free shop?' Peter wasn't bothered, and so he tagged along.

'I thought you might like a digital camera,' Dad told him as they went into an electrical store. Peter stared at his father. Dad explained: 'Well, you know, I thought it would be nice to send some pictures of Qatar to your friends . . .' he stopped himself saying 'back home', opting instead for the more diplomatic 'back in the UK.' Peter said nothing.

'Look, Peter,' his Dad said, realising the meaning of his son's silence, 'I know you're not too happy about leaving England . . .' Dad had a real talent for understatement, Peter decided. 'But you wait until you get there,' his father persevered, 'You'll love it. I've been there – it is an amazing place. And you'll soon make new friends. In a couple of weeks' time you'll have forgotten that you didn't want to go there. Believe me.'

Peter let his father's words wash over him. His father could have been speaking in French, German or even Qatari for all he cared: it would have made no difference. The father-son heart to heart was interrupted by the announcement of their flight. Mum started to round up her family and herd them – like an over-anxious sheepdog – towards the departure gate, where they were met by smiling airline staff. Peter found himself thinking that they must get tired of smiling. Suppose something awful had happened to them – would they smile then? Suppose they felt ill – would they have to take special smiling medicine? Suppose they were being forced to go and live in another country – that would wipe the grin off their faces, surely?

Dad's company had spared no expense in getting their employee and his family to their new home. They were travelling in Business Class and so they were allowed onto the plane ahead of the other passengers. Although this made Peter feel special it didn't dent

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his determination to hate every minute of the flight – purely because it was taking him away from everything he cherished.

‘Welcome Mr Dobbs – if you would like to follow me,’ said the air stewardess. Dad explained later that she was a ‘flight attendant’ and it was her job to look after them.

‘Anything you want, just ask,’ Dad told him. Peter wondered what the flight attendant would say if he asked her to stop the plane so that he could get off and go home. He decided not to bother. Every seat had a TV in front of it, and Peter would have been thrilled by the massive selection of movies and games on offer, had he not been determined not to be. He looked around the half-empty cabin. Various grown ups were preparing for the flight, putting their hand luggage into the overhead lockers, snapping their seatbelts in place; some were even kicking off their shoes and putting on the dull, grey complimentary socks provided by the airline. The passengers were a mixture of men and women in traditional Arab dress, and men in suits – probably businessmen like Peter’s father: but no children. Maybe there was a law banning children from travelling to Qatar, Peter mused hopefully. His hopes were instantly dashed when he realised that if that was the case – he and Cat would have been put off the plane by now. Cat was running the risk of that happening, Peter thought, as he watched his sister taking advantage of the complimentary travel bag of assorted toiletries: she had lip-balmed her lips, deodorised her face and most of the air around it, and was currently assembling the travel toothbrush. Peter hoped that nobody would realise that she was his sister: he hoped that they would imagine that the only reason he was sitting next to her was because they were both children, and they had been placed in a special children’s seating area. He realised that this was a forlorn hope, but he still slid lower in his seat as she screamed with delight as the TV screens in front of them burst into life and a short film began, outlining in-flight safety and what to do in the event of crash. Peter was relieved that the film didn’t mention panicking, especially when Cat suddenly yelled out ‘Wow! We’re going to crash! Cool!’ Mum was clearly a very nervous passenger which prompted Dad to say: ‘We’re not going to crash, Catherine. Flying in an aeroplane is safer than crossing the road.’ Peter thought about asking his father about the statistics for people crossing the road who were then hit by crashing aeroplanes, but he decided that this would not be very helpful!

The flight from Gatwick to Doha airport was about seven hours. Peter tried to sleep, but the flight attendants seemed to be forever offering him food. It didn’t look that different from the sort of meals that he had been used to at home, which surprised him. He’d imagined that he would have to get his stomach used to a whole lot of new fruits, vegetables and meats: in fact this was one of the reasons why he was unwilling to embrace what his Dad referred to as the Great Adventure. ‘Misadventure,’ Peter had said at the time. The other reason he couldn’t sleep was Cat. She seemed determined to be the Passenger of Doom, seeing imaginary plumes of smoke coming from the wings, engines, seats – anywhere. One of the flight attendants finally persuaded Cat to ‘have a little sleep’. The wave of gratitude from the other passengers was almost tangible. Peter wondered

whether any of the Qatari nationals onboard realised that this irritating little girl was going to be living among them – perhaps he could get them to sign a petition banning Cat and her family from living in their country. He realised wistfully that this was yet another forlorn hope.

Peter turned back to the movie on his personal screen. As he did so the screen switched to the name of the airline as an announcement came over the public address system, asking everyone to prepare for the descent into Doha.

‘I thought we were going to Qat-*ar*,’ Cat chirped.

‘Qat-*ar*!’ Peter snapped, despite himself. He may not like the place, but his sister might at least get its name right.

‘We are, sweetie,’ Mum told her daughter indulgently. ‘Doha is the capital of Qatar.’

‘Like London?’ Cat asked her parent.

‘Yes dear,’ Dad told her. *Yes dear*, thought Peter – only bigger, with less people, and definitely *not* home!



CHAPTER 5

The Arrival

Seasoned travellers never seem to wait to be told that they can remove their seatbelts and start getting their bags out of the overhead lockers. This infuriated Cat, especially as she was being told by Mum, in no uncertain terms, to stay in her seat.

‘Why?’ her daughter protested loudly. ‘That man in the scarf is walking about!’

Mum was about to tell Cat not to be so rude when a beaming, gentle smile from the ‘man in the scarf’ made her see that he had not taken any offence, realising that none was intended. Through the window of the plane, and through a haze, Peter could see single-decker coaches drawing up on the tarmac beside the stationary plane: one for Business Class passengers and two for everyone else. Being near the front of the plane Peter was the first to be ushered forward towards the exit door. This is it, he thought. This is Qatar. This is my new life. This Saturday would go down in his personal history as the day his life was ruined, he decided.

The electronic door opened, folding back against the side of the plane. It was approaching three o’clock in the afternoon local time, two hours ahead of the time in Britain. Peter found himself wondering what his best friend Jack was doing: weekend homework? Having his lunch? Feeding the goldfish? Whichever it was Peter wished he was doing it with him. He stepped out through the plane’s exit door and it hit him. Heat – heat like he had never experienced before. It was like walking directly into the path of a giant invisible hair drier.

‘Quickly Peter – we need to get on to the coach,’ Dad urged from behind him. If it’s this hot outside, Peter thought, then being on the coach will be like being inside a boil-in-the-bag meal! But it wasn’t.

‘It’s air conditioned,’ Dad explained. ‘Everywhere is,’ he added.

It would have to be, thought Peter. Peter liked the sun, and he liked getting a tan on holiday, but this was ridiculous! He would be fried alive! The coach delivered them to the Doha airport arrivals lounge. Peter was still focussing on things that might go wrong. For instance, what if, as they passed through passport control, this happened:

‘I’m sorry Mr Dobbs, but your family is not allowed to enter our country. You must go back to the UK.’

Unsurprisingly, the lady at passport control did not say that, even though Peter was willing her to. Instead she said: ‘Welcome to Doha.’

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Maybe when they reached the baggage reclaim area, something would happen there:

'I'm sorry Mr Dobbs, but your bags have been lost. You will have to go back to England and never come here again.'

Even in his wildest dreams Peter realised that this was not going to be said by anyone, even if the bags were lost – which they weren't. Dad put the bags on a trolley and they headed towards the exit. Dad had explained that his company had arranged for them to be met by a driver and taken to their new home. This is the moment, thought Peter hopefully, when it all goes pear-shaped:

'DOBBS FAMILY GO HOME!' Peter checked the sign again, just to be sure and yes – it really did say 'DOBBS FAMILY'. The 'GO HOME' bit had been entirely in his disappointed imagination.

'I am very delighted to meet you and your family, Mr Dobbs. I am Siraj your driver. I am at your disposal for as long as you require.' Peter understood every word that Siraj said. Not only was his English perfect, but his manners were impeccable. So people in Qatar speak English, thought Peter, realising that his list of objections to living here was beginning to reduce. But it hadn't disappeared – not by a very long way. As Siraj pushed the trolley he explained that he was Indian, and had arrived in Qatar fifteen years earlier. 'I came for a very short stay – and it became a very long one!' he joked as he and the Dobbs family walked towards the car park next to the airport. Leaving the building Peter was again struck by the heat – he could not imagine ever getting used to it. But the air was filled with something other than the power of the sun.

'What's that man singing about?' asked Cat. Dad looked horrified. He was about to apologise to Siraj for his daughter's ignorance when the driver smiled at Cat and explained 'He is calling the faithful to prayer.'

He pointed to the high tower above a mosque nearby.

'See? Up there,' he added, as Cat followed the direction of his arm. 'The call to prayer comes from the top of the minaret. It is time for *asr* – afternoon prayers.'

Mum looked concerned.

'Then shouldn't you be . . .' she began, but Siraj stopped her with another disarming smile.

'I have until sunset – plenty of time'.

They headed towards one of the massive white four-wheel drives that seemed to pack the car park. The rows of parking bays were covered with metal roofs, but Peter imagined that was not to keep the rain off the cars. It was probably to shelter the vehicles from the sun, which was turning the air around them into a hazy furnace. Looking past the car park to the road leading to the city centre Peter saw that most of the cars heading along the road were four-wheel drives. He found himself wondering what people back in the UK would think of that – there was a lot of complaints about people driving big cars back home: *Gas Guzzlers* they were called. They must cost hundreds of pounds to run, Peter imagined. Dad must have been thinking the same sort of thing, because he leant close to

Peter and whispered, 'Apparently you can fill your tank for about a tenner out here!' Peter was impressed, even though he wasn't expecting to stay long enough to own his own car.

They were soon heading along the busy highway towards their new home, a journey that now seemed inevitable to Peter. I might as well relax and enjoy the scenery, he thought. He looked out of the window at the rows of white buildings. He was vaguely aware of his father telling him that a lot of the modern buildings were based on the architecture of the traditional settlement buildings, and even the old forts and palaces. Most of the houses were small and white, with thick walls so that they stayed cool in summer and warm in winter. Peter couldn't imagine this place ever having a winter, but he did quite like the look of the squat buildings, which seemed to surround him on every side.

'Except over there,' Dad said, pointing. In the hazy distance Peter could see a large number of very tall, modern – almost futuristic – buildings that would not look out of place in London, New York, or even Hong Kong. They seemed odd, standing so close to the older, smaller and more traditional buildings, and yet they didn't feel out of place. In fact they looked amazing. For the first time Peter realised, much to his own annoyance, that he was regretting refusing his father's offer of a digital camera. What was happening, he wondered. Was Qatar trying to cast a spell on him to make him like her? If so then the city was going to have to try harder than that, he told himself with grim determination. Yes – much harder.

CHAPTER 6

The New Life

The Dobb's family's new home was exactly that – new. It was a flat – or 'apartment' as Dad insisted on calling it – in a modern building. Although it wasn't exactly a skyscraper – it did tower over the nearby buildings that housed many Qatari residents. It seemed to be looking down at the smaller buildings and feeling very smug. Everything about the apartment was shiny and untouched. Dad went round ripping protective sheets of plastic off various surfaces. Cat went round screeching and whooping with joy. Anybody would think she'd spent all her life living in a cardboard box, Peter thought to himself sulkily. He was desperately struggling to *not* be impressed by their new home. It was impressive after all. Impressive, yes, but it wasn't *home*. And it never would be if Peter had anything to do with it.

'Bagsy this bedroom!' Cat was heard claiming her space from somewhere to Peter's right.

'You'll get the room you're given young lady,' Dad was heard telling her.

'Oh, let her choose,' Mum said. Peter headed towards the voices. After all, he wanted a decent room even if he was hoping that they wouldn't be staying here. He stepped into a room with a great view of the city.

'You can have this room Peter, if you like,' his mother told him, as she followed him in and put her arm around his shoulder. Peter flinched, but didn't wriggle free. Mum could tell that he wasn't happy, and so she tightened her grip around him ever so slightly. She lightly kissed the top of his head and whispered in his ear: 'Well, Peter – what do you think of your new home?'

'It's OK,' Peter said grudgingly, 'but it's *not* home.'

Peter's new school was also brand new. Like many buildings in Qatar it had been built very recently. The country was expanding fast and this was obvious from the number of building sites and men in yellow hard hats – they were everywhere. Back in the UK Peter would have been about to finish his first year at secondary school. He had an August birthday, which meant that he was one of the youngest in his class. But he would soon be twelve, and would be starting in year eight in September: hopefully back in the UK, which was more than five thousand kilometres from where he was now reluctantly standing, outside the school gates. He felt like an alien that had just dropped out of the sky. In reality he'd just been dropped off by his mother in their brand new obligatory white four-

wheel drive, which Peter had to admit to himself was cool. He wasn't going to admit it out loud though. The last impression he wanted to give was that he was finding *anything* about his new life even remotely 'cool'.

'Hi.' Peter half-turned to see a boy standing nearby. He was the same age as Peter, and from his clothing Peter guessed that he was Qatari: he was wearing a *thobe*. The boy spoke English with a lilt and only the slightest trace of an accent.

'I'm Ebrahim,' the boy said, beaming a bright, white even smile from a face dominated by large, friendly brown eyes. Peter grunted. Despite his good command of English, Ebrahim was unable to work out whether this was a friendly gesture or a warning. The Qatari boy shrugged and headed into school.

'See you,' he threw back over his shoulder.

'Hope not,' Peter muttered under his breath. Then with the resignation that goes with the inevitable, he dragged himself through the gates and into school.

Peter's father had insisted that his children should go to schools where they would mix with local Qatari children, and the one Peter's father chose for Peter had children from all over the world, although more than half were Qatari. This new school was perfect in every way: a clean, modern school environment with every learning resource imaginable. Even a child with no academic ability could thrive here – as long as he wanted to be there. Peter didn't. He would happily have swapped the air conditioned classrooms and state-of-the-art computer suites for the graffiti and bullying that typified schools in the UK.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive welcome he got from pupils and staff alike, Peter managed to contribute virtually nothing to his first day's schooling. Waiting for his mother outside the school that afternoon, Peter again saw the Qatari boy from that morning. Again he grunted when the boy tried to talk to him. Again the boy shrugged.

Most of Peter's first week at school followed the same pattern. Mum dropped him off, the Qatari boy greeted him, Peter grunted, the Qatari boy shrugged, Peter sat silently in class and then he went home. His teachers seemed to be making allowances for his situation and mostly they left him alone, which was the way he wanted it. Any teacher that did try to engage him in conversation got a grunt for their trouble. But Peter was finding it increasingly difficult to shut himself off from the rest of the world. It was against his nature. He was normally outgoing and friendly, and the pressure of trying to be somebody he wasn't, was beginning to take its toll. He vented his frustration in the only way he knew how – karate. For most of the weekend he turned his demons into imaginary adversaries and did battle with them on the large balcony of the new apartment. He ignored requests to come indoors and eat. He ignored demands to go to bed. He also ignored warnings about the sun. By Sunday night he was bright red and in quite a lot of pain.

'I think we'd better keep you off school today,' Peter's Mum told him as she examined his sunburn on the first morning of the new school week.

'No,' Peter told her defiantly. 'I'm going.'

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‘Don’t be silly dear,’ His mother said indulgently. ‘How on earth will you concentrate?’

‘I’m going.’ Aware that the conversation was over, Mum sloshed as much aftersun cream onto Peter as the boy would allow, and then drove him to school. He was in agony, but there was no way he was going to let anyone see that. As they arrived at the school gates Peter gingerly edged his way out of the car, stifling a yell as his arm caught the door frame. Without turning back to thank his mother Peter headed for the gates. Realising that any meaningful exchange of words with her son was unlikely, Mrs Dobbs revved the engine and pulled out into traffic, soon to be swallowed up by the long white dragon that is Qatari residents heading for work. Peter edged his way painfully towards the gates, trying to look and walk as normally as possible. The smiling Qatari boy was there. What had he said his name was? Whats-his-name was standing in his usual place, smiling as usual. The difference was that – this morning – the smile didn’t stop at *friendly and open* – it continued to spread across the boy’s face until it reached *beaming* – and still it didn’t stop. It spread and spread until it reached *laughter* – and the sound of laughter accompanied it. Not derision, but pure, affectionate laughter – the laughter of a friend who appreciates another friend’s discomfort, but can’t help enjoying it. Peter and Jack had often laughed at each other in this way – it was always well-meant. But Whats-his-name was *not* Jack. Peter was angry – how dare this stranger laugh in his face? But he quickly realised that he deserved the other boy’s reaction. For the past week his behaviour had been pathetic. Nobody in this new country had done anything to make him dislike it or them. In fact most people had gone out of their way to make him feel welcome, from Siraj at the airport, to the teachers, to this strange boy who now almost falling over with mirth. Peter realised how foolish he must have looked this past week with his posturing and sulking. He also realised that nobody had judged him.

He later understood that this was the moment when he and Whats-his-name became friends.

CHAPTER 7

The New Friend

‘Why is he wearing a dress?’

The atmosphere, which had been slightly tense but warm, now suddenly froze colder than the icy wastes of the Antarctic. Mum looked like she’d gone into shock, Dad quietly choked on a chip. Cat sat, looking as though butter would not melt in her mouth. Butter would not melt anywhere in this frosty atmosphere, Peter thought to himself as he prayed that the earth would open and swallow him up. Only What’s-his-name – Ebrahim – remained totally calm. After what seemed like a week, but was in reality only a few seconds, he smiled his most disarming smile.

‘No, Catherine – it is not a dress. It is my . . .’ He struggled for a moment to find the word he wanted, got it and continued: ‘It is my nightshirt. I have to go to bed early tonight and will not have time to change.’

The room warmed up quicker than if someone had set fire to it. Cat looked deflated as her mother flashed a black look at her daughter. Her father winced as he tried to give his daughter’s leg a warning tap with his foot, but stubbed his toe on the table leg instead.

‘May I have more turkey . . . ah . . . twizzlers please, Mrs Dobbs?’ Ebrahim asked, far more politely than he needed to, considering what had just happened. Peter marvelled at his new friend’s composure: this guy was so cool! But what was Cat playing at, he wondered? She knew that Qataris dressed differently. Dad had explained about the *thobe*, shortly after he’d told her for the millionth time to stop staring at people. Cat knew about most of the traditional dress. Some girls at her school, and most of the female teachers, wore the *hejab*. None of this was unfamiliar to Cat. Peter concluded that she had said what she’d said on purpose, just to try and embarrass him in front of his new friend. She probably did it because she hadn’t managed to make any friends herself. Everybody at her school probably thought that she was a freak, Peter said to himself.

‘They’ve got that right,’ he muttered, accidentally speaking out loud.

‘Got what right, dear?’ his mother asked.

‘Oh . . . er, nothing,’ Peter told her, obviously lying.

‘So, Ebrahim, how are you enjoying school? Peter tells me that you might get into the football team.’

For the next hour Ebrahim was grilled about every aspect of his life. Peter sat there thinking that maybe inviting his friend for a meal hadn’t been such a good idea. Actually

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it was his mother's idea, which was surprising because his mother couldn't cook anything that didn't involve a microwave at some point. But Peter was seriously impressed by the way Ebrahim dealt with the barrage of inane questions being fired at him: this boy is so cool, thought Peter.

A short time later Ebrahim's father arrived to take him home. Ebrahim thanked Peter's parents for inviting him. Surely he doesn't really mean that, Peter thought, suspiciously? Ebrahim then told Catherine that that it had been a pleasure to meet her. Peter knew then that his friend must be lying! But no – Ebrahim seemed totally sincere. As Peter waved to his pal as the car pulled away, he thought: 'there goes a great friend. Oh, well – it was good while it lasted.' The next day at school Peter was amazed, and delighted, to get a return invitation to have a meal with Ebrahim's family.

Peter discovered that Qataris have a different attitude towards family than he was used to in the UK. Peter saw his grandmother maybe once a month, and other family members only at Christmas. Sitting at the huge dining table in Ebrahim's home Peter found himself surrounded by several generations of Ebrahim's family and many of them – though not all – lived in the same house! Apparently it was traditional that when a Qatari child grew up and married, the family home would be expanded to accommodate the new family members. This could continue until sometimes several generations lived under the same roof.

'Amazing food!' Peter blurted out, unable to stop himself.

'My mother spoils us,' Ebrahim told him. Peter could believe it: he could never imagine her going to the Mall for frozen turkey twizzlers. He couldn't even imagine that the Mall sold them, which would come as a big disappointment to his own mother.

'All women should learn to cook!' said a large man sitting across the table. This turned out to be Uncle Mansour, and the lady next to him, wagging a warning finger in Mansour's face with an indulgent smile, was his wife. Mansour's wife must be a brilliant cook, thought Peter, looking at the uncle's expanding waistline. Mansour's branch of the family were visiting for the evening: Peter got the impression that this was a special family gathering, and he felt very honoured to be invited.

'My uncle works at the Qatar National Museum,' Ebrahim explained. 'I sometimes help him.' At last, thought Peter, we're talking about something I know about. 'I've seen that,' he told them enthusiastically, 'on water at the Corniche!'

His enthusiasm was instantly dashed by gentle laughter around the table.

'No!' said Mansour, spluttering slightly on a mouthful of food. 'That's the Museum of Islamic Art!' Peter felt very foolish, and Ebrahim seemed to instinctively realise this.

'How is Peter supposed to know that?' he snapped angrily. 'He's only been here for a few weeks!' Silence fell around the table. Ebrahim had clearly gone too far, even though he was only defending his new friend. Ebrahim's parents gave him a stern look. They seemed about to say something when Mansour raised a hand to stop them. Then, turning to Ebrahim he said: 'You are right.' Then to Peter he added: 'Please accept my apologies.'

‘Oh it’s . . .’ Peter started to say, but Mansour again held up his hand.

‘I would be honoured if you would visit me at the museum. It is near the Corniche.’ Then, with a twinkle in his eye that was obviously a family trait, he added: ‘but not on the water.’

As Peter’s father arrived to collect him, several of the male members of Ebrahim’s family came out to greet him.

‘Don’t forget to come and visit me!’ Mansour called as Peter’s father slipped the four by four into gear. ‘The Qatar National Museum – *near* to the Museum of Islamic Art!’

‘Did you have a good time?’ Dad asked as they headed home.

‘Yes,’ Peter told him, too tired to be drawn into a long conversation. Dad didn’t seem to realise this.

‘What did you have to eat?’ he asked. Peter thought for a minute: how would you describe the food? It was a bit like Indian food, or maybe Greek food, but then again not at all like either of them. It was unique, and amazing. There were tastes – some strong, some subtle – that Peter had never experienced anywhere else before.

‘Well – what did you have to eat?’ Dad persisted. Peter couldn’t be bothered: ‘Turkey twizzlers,’ he lied.

Dad beamed with delight.

‘See!’ he said, ‘they’re not that different from us after all!’

Yeah right, thought Peter as he yawned and slumped further down into the big leather seat of the car, which hummed on into the darkening warmth of the night.

CHAPTER 8

The Discovery

Sorry,' Peter told Ebrahim as Peter's father pulled back into traffic having dropped him off at the Qatar National Museum. Ebrahim looked at what Peter was apologising for.

'Hi,' said Cat.

'Mum insisted that she should come with me.' Peter explained, rolling his eyes.

If Ebrahim minded he showed no sign. He simply shrugged and smiled.

'That's OK,' he said. 'Let's go!'

'Wow! It looks like a castle!' Cat blurted out excitedly as they walked towards the bright white building.

'It's a fort,' Peter snapped, keen to make her feel as unwelcome as possible. How could Mum lumber me with her, he asked himself?

'It was actually built as a palace,' Ebrahim pointed out gently. He was determined to make the most of their day together, and he accepted that Cat was now a part of it. As they neared the entrance uncle Mansour came waddling down the steps at the side of the fort that led to the upper level, where cannons had once been placed.

'There you are!' he chortled with delight.

'And who have we here?' he added, beaming a great toothy grin at Cat.

'My sister,' Peter told him, weighting his answer with as much apology as he could muster. He was secretly hoping that Uncle Mansour would tell them that there was an ancient law preventing girls from entering the museum. No such luck!

'Splendid! Splendid!' Mansour gushed. 'You are very welcome, young lady! Now – let me show you round.'

He led the way into the museum, chattering and pointing excitedly at exhibits as he went, making no attempt to disguise his pride in his workplace. He confirmed that the museum had been built as a palace for Sheikh Abdullah, one of the sons of the great Sheikh Jasim himself.

'Sheikh Jasim!' Peter exclaimed. 'I've heard of him.'

Mansour laughed kindly. He had always imagined that there was not a single person on the planet who had not heard of – and greatly admired – Sheikh Jasim. He stopped and went silent, taking in the surroundings. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

'Yes,' he said finally with an air of great reverence. 'The great Sheikh Jasim – may he rest in peace.'

THE DISCOVERY



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The children stood and stared at him, wondering what he was going to do next. Mansour suddenly launched himself at a nearby door with more speed than his great bulk seemed capable of.

‘Come on!’ he called back over his shoulder. The children followed obediently behind.

The next part of their journey took them into the back section of the building. This was a part that the public never saw, a warren of passages and small rooms. The public areas had been beautifully restored to even more than their former glory, but these back rooms retained much of the quality – not to say smell – of the original building. As they passed through them Peter imagined that this would be where a fort would store its weapons and gun powder. He’d seen the cannon placements around the top of the fort and Ebrahim had explained how important cannons had been in battle. Peter also imagined that these rooms were where the troops would sleep and eat: maybe it was where they came if they were injured; maybe dying; maybe even dead. Peter found himself wishing he could experience what it was like to be in a battle in this fort – without the threat of death of course!

Mansour led them into a room full of assorted artefacts from times past. There were weapons, pottery, clothing and fishing implements – all manner of things in various states of repair. Mansour explained that the small back rooms were where the museum stored their surplus artefacts. Most museums had more things than they had room to display, he told them.

‘We are stock taking at the moment,’ Mansour explained, trying to make the task sound very important. ‘Your help will be much appreciated.’

The children looked at each other – this sounded a bit like hard work, and they had been expecting to have fun. Mansour laughed: he seemed to know exactly what was going through their minds.

‘It will be fun!’ he told them, enthusiastically.

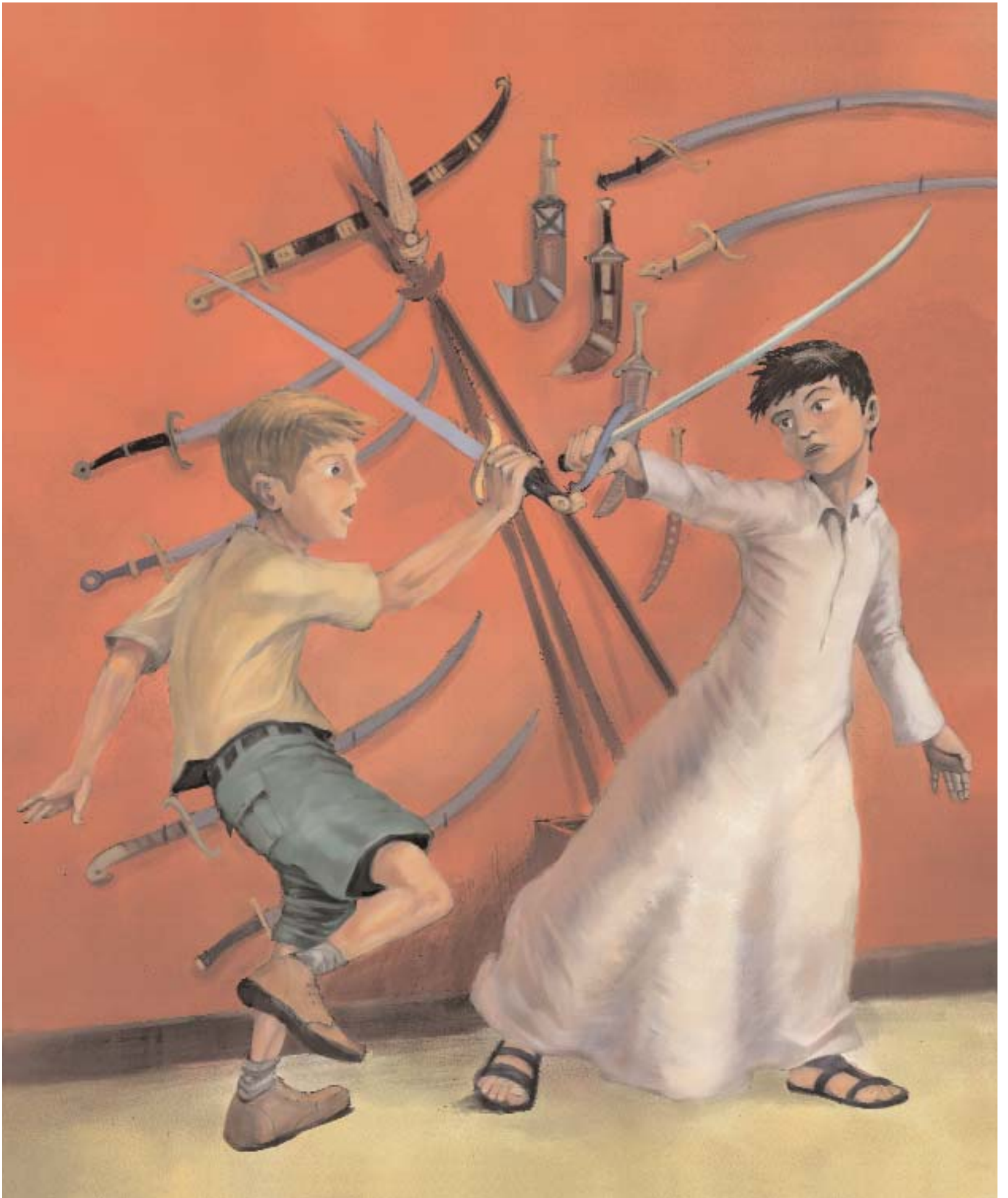
He explained that he wanted them to sort things into piles of similar artefacts. Some of the weapons were going to the Museum of Weaponry, some of the pottery and other artwork might end up at the new Museum of Islamic Art. Other things would stay in storage until they were needed. ‘If you are unsure about anything, call me,’ he told them and then disappeared back to the main museum, humming cheerfully as he went.

‘What a lot of rubbish,’ Cat complained.

As she did so she flicked a pile of clothing with her hand, disturbing a cloud of dust and making herself cough.

‘Come on,’ Ebrahim told them, ‘let’s get started.’

With a collective sigh the three children set about the task of stock taking the strange array of artefacts that were crammed into every corner of the small room. Every time they moved something another heap of potential ‘junk’ was revealed. As Peter had privately predicted to himself, it wasn’t long before his little sister was becoming extremely irritating, as only she knew how. On the plus side it also wasn’t long before he and Ebrahim had found a couple of 19th century swords and were having a mock fight.



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‘Pack it in, you two,’ Cat told them.

She was wasting her time. In their heads the two boys were in the middle of some great Qatari battle – or maybe sword fighting up and down the narrow corridors of one of Qatar’s many forts. Possibly they were fighting alongside the elite warriors who had fought in defence of Qatar in this very fort. Perhaps the great leader, Sheikh Jasim was leading them in a charge against some fearsome enemy. Whatever was happening in their heads Cat wanted no part of it, and she moved into the small room next door, where there was an equally high mountain of ‘rubbish’, but thankfully no annoying boys fighting on top of it.

Back in the heat of battle Ebrahim had the upper hand. He waved his sword manically around his head, screaming ‘Take that!’ Both boys were studiously trying to avoid actually clashing the swords together. They were aware that these were ancient artefacts, and as such needed to be treated with respect. But boys will be boys, and occasionally the swords clashed, sending a resounding metallic sound bouncing through the narrow corridors surrounding the room – possibly attracting the attention of unwelcome intruders. One such intruder put his head around the open door.

‘What do you think you are doing?’ the stranger growled.

The two boys guiltily dropped their swords and stared at the newcomer. He had startlingly steely eyes, very dark skin and a scar running from his left temple, across his eye and down onto his lower left cheek. There was no trace of a smile on the thin lips that sat under the large hooked nose, and were surrounded by a severe greying beard. The man did not look friendly. In fact, Peter felt fear creeping into his bones just looking at him.

‘Sorry, sir – we were just . . .’ Ebrahim started to say, but the man cut in.

‘Well, don’t,’ he told them.

There was a chill in his voice. Peter couldn’t explain why, but he felt genuinely frightened of the stranger. He also felt a strong sense that he had seen him before. But where? In a pirate movie? The man certainly looked like a pirate, with his huge scar. Peter wondered how he had got such an angry-looking wound. He also wondered why the man was staring at him in such a terrifying way. The man kept staring, burning into Peter’s very soul with his frightening steely eyes. Peter tried to look away, but he couldn’t. The man was holding his gaze and wouldn’t let go.

‘Everything Okey-Dokey?’ said Uncle Mansour, arriving with a bustle and attempting a bit of English slang.

The strange man threw an angry look towards Mansour and disappeared. Once he’d gone the jovial uncle beamed at the boys cheerily.

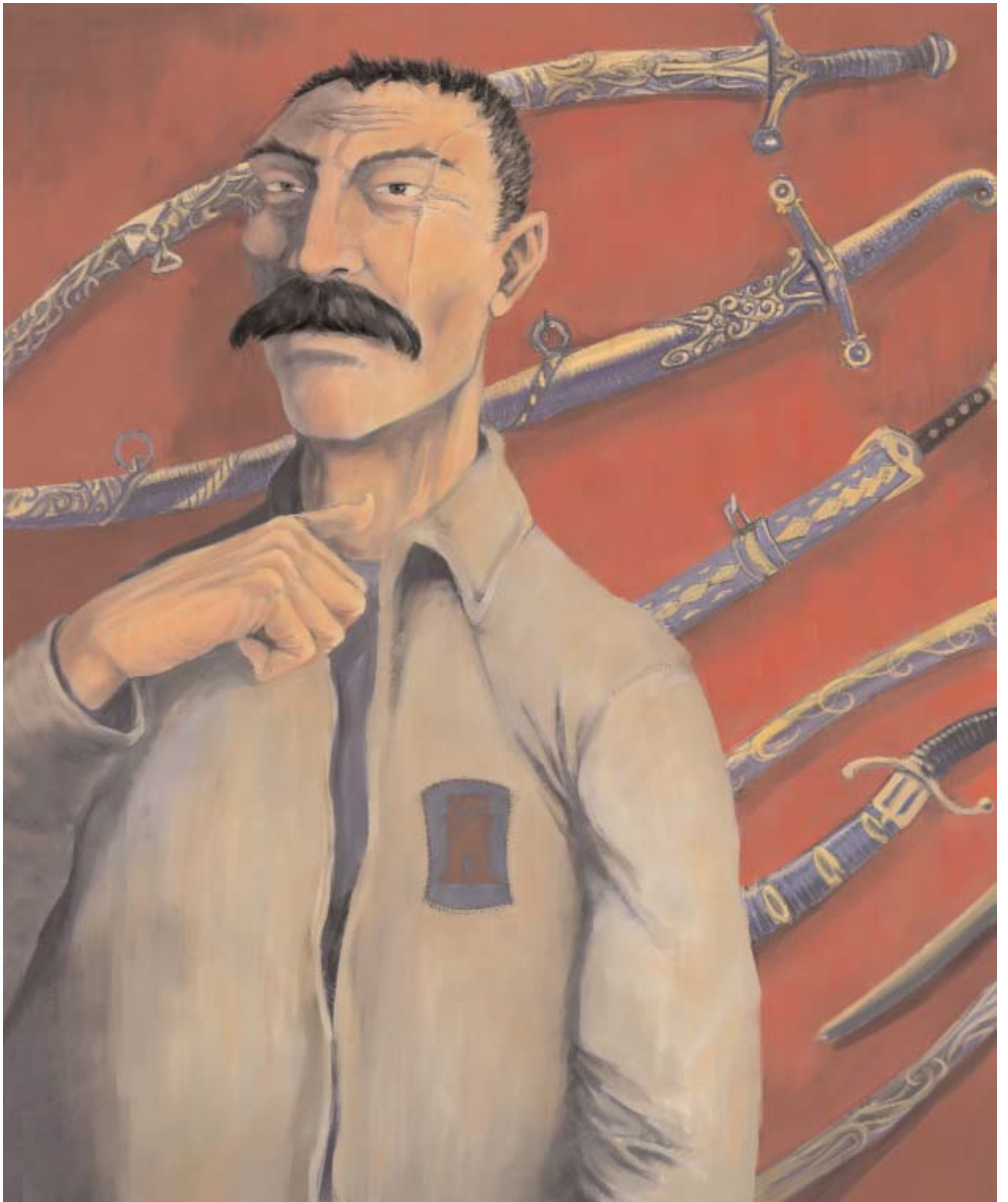
‘You are doing a very grand job!’ He told them, then turned to leave.

‘Excuse me,’ Peter said, stopping Mansour in his tracks. ‘Who was that man?’

‘Oh him!’ Mansour chuckled. ‘Ignore him. We call him Bu-Daryaah!’

‘Who?’ Peter asked.

‘He’s harmless! Ignore him!’



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With that Mansour went off along the corridor, chuckling to himself and muttering 'Bu-Daryaah!'

'Who – what is Bu-Daryaah?' Peter asked Ebrahim, who had now retrieved his sword and was ready to do battle again. Ebrahim stopped and turned to Peter. Peter detected a look of fear deep in Ebrahim's eyes: just for a split second, then it was gone.

'He's . . . it's nobody – nothing,' Ebrahim told his friend, not very convincingly. 'It's just something that . . . forget it. Come on – let's fight.'

'Look! I'm a Bedouin!' Cat was standing in the doorway wearing a sleeveless jerkin made of wool, lined with animal fur. Its faded pattern suggested that it was once bright and colourful.

'No, you're not – you're an idiot!' Peter told her, snappily: he was still shaken by the appearance of the stranger.

'This is cool,' Cat said as she turned on the spot, showing off the sleeveless jerkin.

'It's certainly smelly!' Ebrahim told her, grateful for the distraction.

'Look,' she told them, 'it's got huge pockets and everything.'

So saying Cat thrust her hands deep into the pockets of the hand-made garment.

'What's this?' she exclaimed in surprise as she pulled out a strange-looking stone. The boys moved closer to get a better look. The stone was about the size of a chicken egg, and appeared to have been bluish in colour at one time: now it was caked in the dust and grime of many centuries.

'It could do with a polish,' Peter said, reaching for his handkerchief.

'You'll never clean that up,' Ebrahim told him. 'We need to chip that muck off with something sharp. Just a minute.' He grabbed a nearby dagger and was about to chip away at the stone when Cat stopped him.

'We can't do that!' she told him. 'It might be precious!'

'Rubbish,' Peter told her. 'But I wonder where it came from? How did it get into that pocket?'

'How does anything happen?' Ebrahim said. 'Give it to me,' he told Cat, but she pulled it away, out of his reach.

'We need to be careful with it,' she told him. 'It's very precious.'

The boys stared at her.

'How do you know that?' Peter scoffed.

'I don't know – but it is,' Cat insisted.

She held the strange stone close to her face and stared at it. 'I bet it was really beautiful once upon a time.' Then she gently blew on the stone . . .

Everything went black.

CHAPTER 9

The Boat

I was dark. The air smelled of a rich, rancid mix of salty sea air, damp canvas, wood and fish. Peter had no idea where he was, but he did know that he was no longer in the small back room of the Qatar National Museum. He imagined from the gentle bobbing motion of the wooden floor beneath him that he was no longer on dry land. Beyond that his imagination was struggling to cope. Am I on my own, he wondered?

‘Ebrahim? Cat?’ he whispered, cautiously.

‘I’m here,’ Ebrahim whispered at his side.

‘Where are we?’ Cat whispered, equally close. All three of them were safe, Peter was relieved to discover. Where they were, how they got there and the hundreds of other unanswered questions would be easier to tackle, knowing that they were all safe.

‘This thing stinks,’ exclaimed Cat, pushing away the damp, smelly canvas sail that was covering them.

‘Careful!’ Ebrahim hissed, reaching to stop her. He was too late, and moonlight now streamed in upon them. Apart from the creaking of the boat, and the gentle lapping of the sea against the sides of the craft, everywhere was quiet. The children gingerly poked their heads further out of their hiding place, like baby birds stretching their necks out of the nest in search of food. There was not a soul in sight.

‘I’m starving,’ Cat said, standing up, then adding, ‘Oi!’ when Peter pulled her back down again.

‘Are you mad?’ he demanded, feeling that he’d known the answer to this question for several years.

‘Peter is right, Catherine . . .’ Ebrahim started to say, gently.

She corrected him: ‘Cat.’

‘Cat,’ he said, ‘but Peter is right. We cannot take any chances. We are on a boat, which means that we are probably not alone. It is night-time. The crew will be sleeping.’

‘What about look-outs?’ Peter asked.

‘Exactly,’ agreed Ebrahim. ‘We can take no chances.’

Cat glowered as she took this in. The boys were right, of course. But it didn’t alter the facts: ‘I’m still starving,’ she told them defiantly.

‘I’ll see what I can find,’ Ebrahim told her, slipping out from under the sail and disappearing into the gloomy night.

‘If anything happens to him it’ll be your fault,’ Peter told his younger sister.



'I can't help being hungry,' she told him.

'You can't help just being *you*,' He retorted.

Since neither of them really had the energy for a sibling spat, they lapsed into an uneasy silence, lying back down on the damp wooden deck of the boat, waiting for the safe return of their friend.

'You look silly in a dress,' Cat muttered, just loud enough to annoy her brother.

'Thobe!' Peter snapped back, then sat up with a jolt as he realised for the first time that he was wearing traditional Qatari clothing. He looked over at Cat. She too was dressed in a *thobe*, and with her short-cut bobbed hair she looked every inch like the young Qatari boys that were seen around the streets of Doha. But how had they . . . Peter started to wonder. Cat was clearly having the same thoughts.

'The Pearl! It must have been!' she exclaimed.

'Rubbish! How can a pearl . . .?'

'Because it's magic, dur-brain!' Cat scoffed, as though she was stating the obvious.

'That's stupid,' he scoffed back. 'You only get magic pearls in fairy stories.'

He looked down at his tattered and smelly *thobe*.

'If the pearl is magic, it might at least have made us princes instead of beggars,' he commented.

'Princesses,' Cat corrected him.

'Speak for yourself,' he told her as Ebrahim returned carrying some bread and fish.



‘Right,’ he told them as they settled down to eat, ‘I know where we are, but I have no idea how we got here.’

Ebrahim explained that they were on board a *boum*, and before Cat could say ‘what’s a boum?’ Ebrahim explained that it was a different style of *dhow*.

‘Sorry – but what’s a *dhow*?’ Peter asked.

‘It’s a traditional Qatari fishing boat,’ Ebrahim explained. ‘Sometimes they’re quite small – but this *boum* is quite big.’ Ebrahim suddenly fell silent, looking very pensive.

‘What’s the matter?’ Peter asked.

‘Some of the larger boats are built to stay at sea for the whole pearling season,’ Ebrahim replied. ‘We could be stuck on board for several months.’

‘Fantastic!’ Cat exclaimed sarcastically.

‘But I still don’t see how we got here,’ Peter was saying.

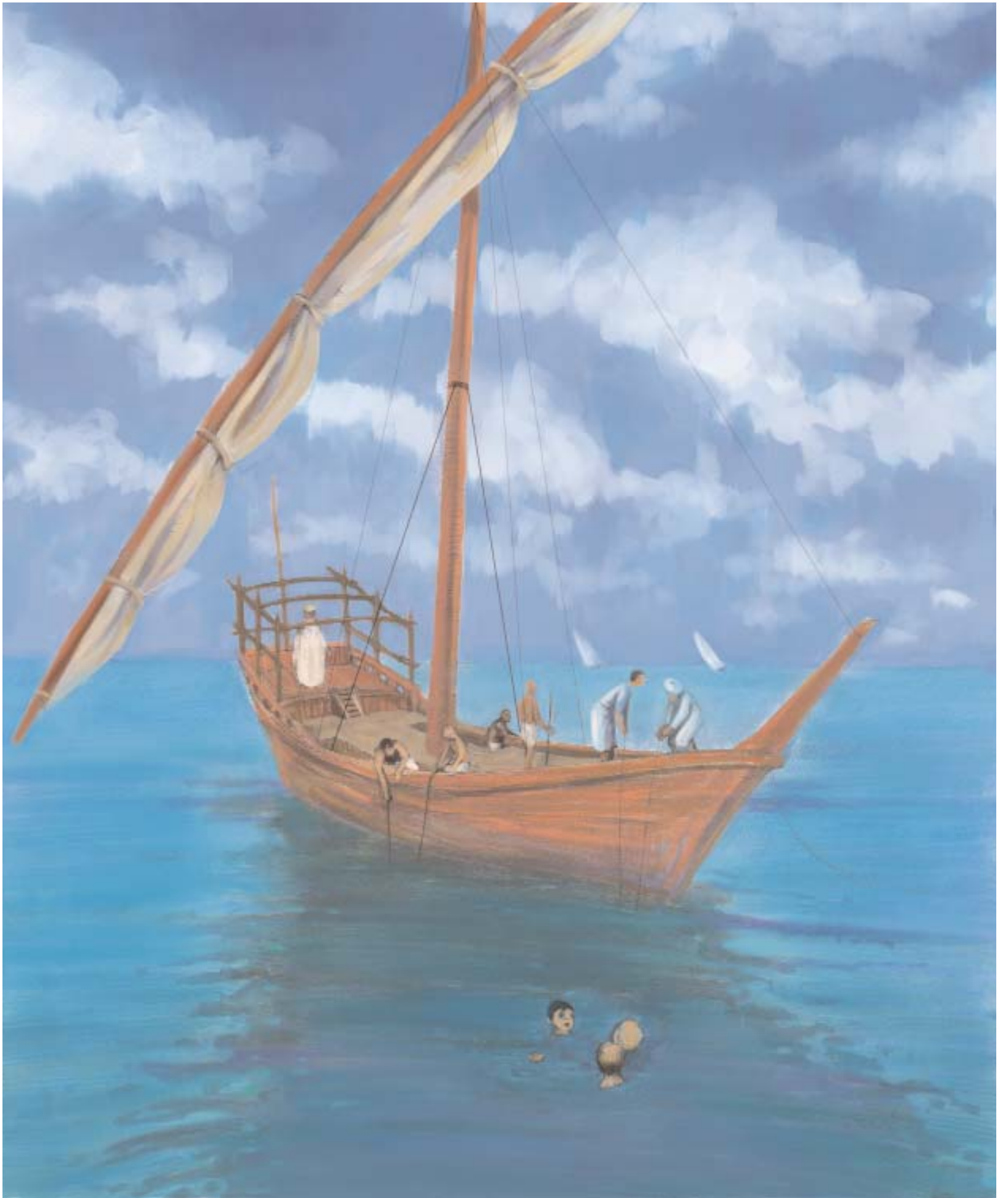
‘I told you, it was the pearl,’ Cat told him again.

‘Well if the pearl got us here, it can take us home again,’ Ebrahim said, cheering up considerably.

‘Yes!’ Peter agreed enthusiastically.

‘It *could*,’ Cat told them, ‘but we haven’t got it any more.’

A thorough search of the immediate area proved that Cat was right: the pearl was gone. Ebrahim was also right: they were likely to be stuck at sea for some time.



CHAPTER 10

The Pearl

As the sun rose, heralding the dawn, the boat burst into life. Men, who the previous night had been tucked away out of sight, now bustled around the decks, responding to the barked orders of the *Nokhida*, or ship's captain. The boys had worked out that, since Qatar's pearling industry died out around 1930, they must have travelled back in time. They decided not to even attempt to work out how. Ebrahim explained that, in the old days, a *Nokhida* was greatly respected: some were held in awe, because they had an almost mystical instinct for finding pearls. They could also be tough and fearsome, and the crew knew only too well that they were there to work hard. Having prayed and eaten, every man on board went to his station. First the crew had to get the ship to a particular pearl bed somewhere in the comparatively shallow waters off the Qatar peninsula. In modern times many of these beds were oil fields, bringing the 'black gold' that was to become the new pearl in Qatar's crown. Did any of these men, sweating in the heat of the sun, realise that one day pearling would be a thing of the past? Peter wondered.

'Come on,' Ebrahim said, ushering the two Dobbs children along the deck toward the ship's rail.

'Where are we going?' Cat wanted to know.

'Fishing,' Ebrahim told her.

Further along the deck they could now see a small group of young boys dangling fishing lines over the side of the ship. This would provide the next meal, Ebrahim explained. If the young boys already fishing were at all curious about the three new arrivals, they didn't mention it. This may have been because talking was not encouraged onboard ship, although singing was. As the men and boys worked, the air filled with the singing of the *nahham* – or lead singer. As they fished Peter started to wonder whether Mansour had noticed their disappearance from the museum. What was the uncle doing now he wondered? He hoped that Mansour would be keeping an eye on Bu-Daryaah, or whatever that man's real name was.

Cat listened to the singing.

'Do you think he knows any modern stuff?' she asked, making Peter giggle, despite his fears about their desperate situation. Jack hates fishing, Peter suddenly remembered. He wondered what his friend was doing now, back in the UK, and wished he was doing it with him. On the far side of the ship the divers were preparing for the start of their long and

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arduous day. They would make anything up to fifty dives every day, which may or may not result in finding perfect pearls, the much treasured Dana. Each diver had a *saib*, whose job it was to pull the diver – or *ghais* – back to the surface quickly. This increased the number of dives the *ghais* could make, but was also very useful if the *ghais* ran out of breath or got caught in the tangled mass of coral and other marine life that lined the seabed. A *saib* and *ghais* who worked well together were a winning combination: there was certainly no room for petty arguments. Peter watched fascinated as the divers attached weights to their ankles: this helped them to dive as fast as possible – but it also explained why they needed a *saib* to pull them back up. The captain barked at his divers to hurry them up, as they clipped their tortoise shell nose clips in place, pushed wax into their ears to protect their eardrums, and slid leather finger stalls onto their fingers to protect them from sharp coral. As the divers prepared, each *saib* attached a rope to his diver's waist and checked that it was secure – there was no room for mistakes. Each diver closed his eyes as he prepared to throw himself over the side of the ship – Peter imagined that this was a last-minute prayer for a successful day's diving, not to mention a safe return. The divers dropped into the water. The *nahham* continued to sing and the rest of the crew got back to work.

Thinking about it afterwards, Peter could not work out what had possessed him to jump overboard. Seeing the precautions that the divers took, he realised that he could so easily have been killed. But when it came to it, he felt that he had no say in the matter: it was as though something else was controlling him.

'I hate fishing,' Cat was complaining, for the hundredth time.

'Go and tell the captain, then,' Ebrahim suggested. 'Perhaps he'll have some video games for you to play!'

Cat started to say 'don't be silly, he hasn't got any . . .' when she realised that Peter's new friend was joking.

'Ha, ha,' she said flatly, then sighed and went back to tending her fishing line.

Peter moved away. The thoughts in his head were beginning to get to him: how had they got here? How would they get back to their own time? What did any of it mean? Away from the others he stared into the clear blue sea, half hoping to find a solution below the gentle waves. As he looked into the water he was surprised to see how clear it was. On the other side of the ship, he imagined, things would be different. The frantic activity of the divers would be stirring the ocean, churning the silt and sand from the sea bed. But on this side of the ship the ocean was calm. As Peter stared into the water he suddenly thought he saw a faint glow among the coral and twisting reeds, dull at first then steadily getting brighter. A bright bluish light: calling to him. Lights don't call to people, Peter told himself, but this light was doing just that. It was as clear as the water itself, and it was telling him to jump into the sea. The only thing holding Peter back was logic – and perhaps the fear of knowing that he couldn't swim. Fear didn't stop him climbing onto the ship's rail, gripping the rigging of the mast as he did so. Logic didn't stop him letting go of the rigging and balancing on the rail, arms outstretched like a tightrope walker who was



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afraid of heights. Neither logic nor fear – nor the yelling voices of Ebrahim and Cat – stopped him launching himself head-long into the water, shattering the surface and heading straight for the strange bluish glow whose call was now screaming in his ears.

Once in the sea all sound ceased. The panicky calls of his sister and his friend failed to penetrate the surface of the Gulf waters. Had Peter looked up he would have seen their refracted faces distorted like melting snowmen noiselessly calling to him. But he didn't look up. He headed downwards, straight for the bluish glow, which was now little more than a few metres away, shining out from a small gap between the coral. Peter tore at the coral with his bare hands, gashing them on the jagged edges of the multi-coloured marine life. Then he saw it: the pearl. Or at least it was how he imagined the pearl would have looked if they'd succeeded in cleaning it up. It was the same size, shape, everything. He gently reached in between the broken coral and took it from its home on the sea bed. He cupped the egg-like pearl in his hand and stared at it in wonder. It had taken his breath away – and yet he wasn't breathless. He felt the glow from the pearl bounce around his face as it reacted with the motion of the ocean. The motion suddenly got stronger, as if an undersea current had been disturbed, or as though something – or somebody – was approaching. Peter realised that he was not alone. Swimming towards him he saw the familiar and sinister form of the man he knew only as Bu-Daryaah. There was no mistaking him, even though there was no scar crossing his frightening face.

'What's he doing?' Cat asked, frantically peering into the sea in the direction of Peter's disappearance.

'I don't know,' Ebrahim told her, trying not to sound panicky, but failing. 'But if he doesn't come up soon he'll run out of breath.'

The man known as Bu-Daryaah gripped Peter's wrist with such force that the boy was startled into catching his breath, which allowed some water into his lungs and expelled what little air he had left. He knew that he had to get to the surface fast, but Bu-Daryaah was not going to let go until he had the pearl. Twisting Peter's arm behind his back, the big man produced a large knife from his belt. Peter imagined this was normally used to free divers from reeds and other tangled undergrowth that covered the seabed in among the coral. In this instance the man was hoping to use it to prise the egg-shaped pearl from Peter's hand. The burning sensation in the boy's chest told him that unless he reached the surface very soon the pearl would be of no use to him. He tried to open his hand and drop the pearl, but his fingers wouldn't move. It felt as though the pearl was in some way preventing him from releasing it. So is this it? Peter thought. Am I going to die on the ocean bed holding a large blue pearl? But instead of resigning itself to a watery end, Peter's body struggled blindly as his chest threatened to burst and let the full might of the Gulf's waters fill his lungs. His hands grappled frantically to shake himself free from his adversary. Suddenly his right hand found the rope attached to man's waist, at the other end of which



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would be a waiting *saib*, ready to haul his diver to the surface. Peter gave it two sharp tugs, and almost instantly Bu-Daryaah jerked backwards, releasing his grip as his trusty *saib* pulled him to the surface. Free, and with the pearl still firmly held in his hand, Peter swam as fast as he could in the direction of the other side of the ship, where hopefully his sister and friend would be waiting.

The man known only as Bu-Daryaah was equally at home being in a rage as he was being menacing. He climbed out of the sea and immediately attacked his confused *saib*. Cat didn't understand what they were shouting about, but Ebrahim explained the gist of the argument: the *saib* had pulled his diver up when he didn't want to be pulled up. Other 'rope-men' were now joining in the argument in defence of their colleague, as Ebrahim and Cat turned back towards the sea to look for Peter. As they did so, his head broke the surface of the water.

'Quick! Grab my hand!' Ebrahim yelled as he lent over the ship's rail as far as he could and reached down.

Peter's limp and sodden hand fell thankfully into that of his friend, and Ebrahim pulled him upwards. As soon as she could reach, Cat joined in, and between them they soon had Peter lying on the deck, flopping and almost lifeless.

Events on the other side of the ship had taken an unfortunate turn. Because of the argument – now a fight – between Bu-Daryaah and the rope-men, one of the other divers had got into trouble. He had been frantically tugging his rope for some time, but had failed to get the attention of his *saib*, who was now involved in a knife fight with Bu-Daryaah. The *Nokhida* had joined in, trying to break up the fight and protect his diver. On the other side of the boat Ebrahim and Cat were trying desperately to get some life back into Peter. In anger, fear and frustration Cat hit her brother in the chest.

'Stop it Peter!' she yelled, 'you're really scaring me!'

Peter's eyes stayed tightly shut, but his hand fell open, revealing the pearl. Momentarily distracted from Peter's condition, Ebrahim and Cat stared in wonder.

'Wow!' exclaimed Cat, 'it's amazing!'

'Isn't it just?' murmured a voice at her ear. As Peter continued to lie motionless, the two friends turned and found themselves staring into the cold steely eyes of Bu-Daryaah.

'Fish him out!' the captain barked at his crew on the other side of the boat. 'And then get back to work!'

Grabbing a pole with a hook on the end, one of the *saib* started to try and get a hold on the near lifeless body now bobbing in the sea. He felt that it was his duty – after all he should have been there to pull the man aboard, but he had been too busy fighting with the mysterious big man that nobody liked, the mysterious big man who had disappeared as soon as the drowning diver had been spotted in the water, desperately gasping for breath, but still very much alive.

'Hand it over,' hissed Bu-Daryaah.

'No,' Cat told him, far more terrified than her defiant tone suggested.

'Give it to him Cat,' Ebrahim told her, quietly.

The pearl meant nothing if Peter was dying. Peter lay motionless. Cat glared at the man, then looked for support from Ebrahim, but the boy was in tears. He felt so totally helpless. He wrapped the canvas sail around Peter, realising that it was a futile gesture. Cat seemed to agree. She reluctantly opened her hand and let the pearl roll off it into the outstretched palm of Bu-Daryaah. The man smiled his chilling, heartless smile: he had everything he had ever wanted. He raised the pearl up to his weather-beaten face, turning it slowly and deliberately between his thumb and forefinger. Its light glinted in his cold dead eyes.

'Let me tell you about this pearl,' he began.

But as he did so Peter's inert body suddenly jolted forward into a sitting position, only inches from the pearl. His lungs expelled the trapped sea water, and then gasped at the air in sheer panic. And then Peter's lungs expelled that first mighty breath. It rushed from his body – and swirled around the pearl . . .

Everything went black.

CHAPTER 11

The Desert

There was sand in every direction. Vast, seemingly endless waves of sand, like a mighty yellow ocean. To their left the sand rose steeply like a massive tidal wave. The three children lay on the sand, partially wrapped in the torn canvas sheet that had recently served as Peter's blanket onboard the ship.

'What's that?' Cat asked, freeing herself from the sheet and pointing at the huge bank of sand.

'A dune,' Ebrahim told her.

'Dune?' Peter said incredulously. 'We've got them on the beaches in the UK – but they're little mounds with tufts of grass on them!'

Ebrahim shrugged.

'This is a desert,' he told them.

'So there's not going to be an ice cream van, then?' Cat said in forlorn hope.

'Probably not,' Peter told her.

'Nor water,' Ebrahim added. 'We need to get out of here.'

The three friends looked around. There was absolutely nothing that gave any clues as to which direction 'out of here' might be. The whole desert seemed to be sitting there, defying them to guess the way to safety. Get it right and they may be lucky enough to survive the arduous trek back to 'civilisation'. Getting it wrong meant almost certain death.

'I want to go home,' Cat said, her adventurous spirit starting to desert her. Peter gently put his arm around her.

'I know,' He told her, 'so do I.'

Cat felt something cold and hard in her pocket. She removed it and held it up.

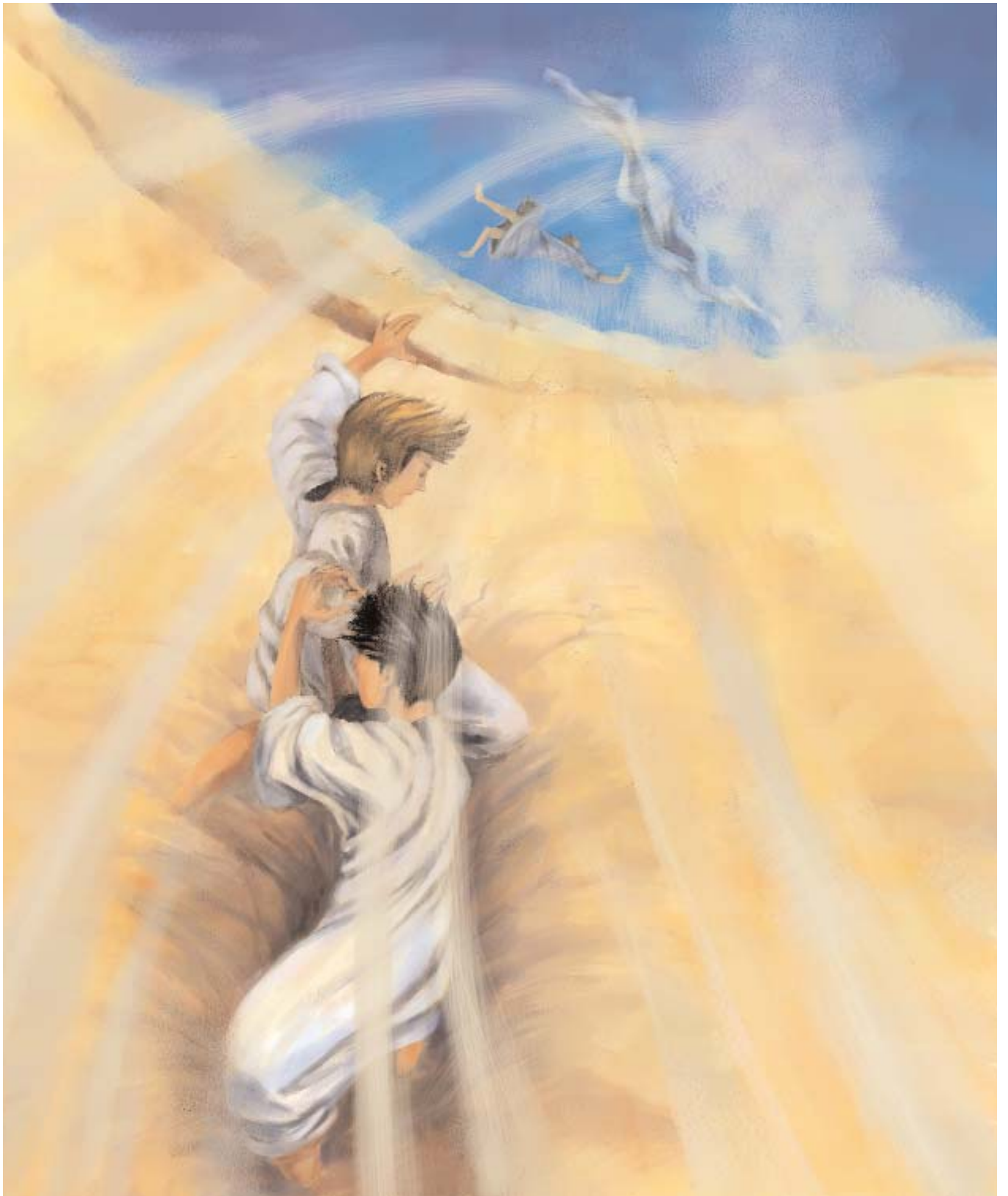
'It's all this stupid pearl's fault!' she blurted out.

'That's it!' exclaimed Ebrahim, 'The pearl! The pearl will take us home!'

'How do you know?' scoffed Peter. 'It may take us to a much worse place than this!' he added, not sure what could be worse than being lost in the middle of a desert.

'Ebrahim's right,' Cat said, 'it's got to be a worth a try!'

She handed the pearl to Ebrahim.



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'Do it,' she told him.

Ebrahim held the pearl in front of his face, pausing for a moment as his ears picked up a distant rumble. He frowned.

'Go for it!' Cat insisted. 'Yes, sorry,' the Qatari boy replied.

The rumble grew slightly louder.

'Here goes,' Ebrahim told the others.

He blew on the pearl, and then immediately started running as fast as he could towards the base of the massive sand dune.

'That's not how it's supposed to work!' Cat said, unable to disguise her disappointment.

'Where are you going?' Peter shouted to his new pal.

All Ebrahim yelled back was: 'come on!'

'He's joking, isn't he?' Cat complained. 'I'm not climbing that thing!'

'Come on!' screamed Ebrahim, as he continued to run, 'Quickly!'

Peter looked up at the rim of the huge sand dune. All along the top of the dune he saw clouds of what appeared to be dust. Peter wasn't sure what it meant, but he knew instinctively that it wasn't good news. He grabbed the canvas sheet.

'Let's go!' He yelled at Cat, grabbing her roughly by the hand and rushing as fast as he could towards the vast dune.

'I'm not ... ouch!' Cat protested as she was dragged along behind her brother.

Above them the rumbling sound was building to a roar.

'I still don't see ...' Cat started to say as Peter pulled her to the ground beside Ebrahim and the three friends huddled tightly at the base of the dune.

'Sand storm,' Ebrahim told her bluntly.

Cat's only unpleasant experience of sand was once back home on the beach at Skegness when the wind blew some of it into her eyes. She hadn't liked it one bit, and she was bright enough to realise that a sand storm would almost certainly be many, many times worse. The roaring above them was now building in intensity. They looked up. The rim of the dune was engulfed in a tidal wave of flying sand.

'Keep down!' Ebrahim shouted above the noise.

They didn't need telling twice. All three of them pressed themselves as tightly down as they could, pulling the canvas sheet over all of their heads as they did so. They gripped the corners and huddled together in fear.

The mighty unstoppable wall of sand rushed down the face of the dune and engulfed the three friends. They huddled even tighter together as the torrent of sand ripped and tore at the canvas sheet. The force of it wrenched one corner from the clenched fist of Cat. She reached up to grab it back, half standing. Ebrahim yelled at her and leapt up to stop her, releasing the sheet as he did so. Cat grabbed her corner of the sheet, but the extreme power of the storm took it, and her, and pulled them both away from the comparative safety of the base of the dune.

‘No!’ screamed Peter, as he watched the sand storm toss the canvas sheet around like a piece of paper in a breeze.

Not knowing what else to do, Cat hung on for grim death. Ebrahim and Peter watched helplessly through the murky haze of the storm, shielding their eyes as best they could. What they saw horrified them. Cat and the canvas sheet were being tossed through the air like a paragliding rag-doll. As Cat disappeared into the dense gloom of the sand storm, Peter desperately tried to stand, intent on saving his sister, but Ebrahim grabbed his arm.

‘Leave her!’ He shouted.

‘She’s my sister!’ Peter screamed back, trying to break free from his friend’s grip: but Ebrahim clung on.

‘There’s nothing you can do,’ he told Peter as gently as the roar of the storm would allow him to. The two friends dropped back into the crook of the dune and waited for the storm to abate. All Peter could think of was how he was going to explain to his parents that he hadn’t managed to keep his little sister safe, that he hadn’t been able to save her life.

How long they lay huddled in the desert was uncertain. The two boys lay there bracing themselves against being swept away. When the roar of the storm finally abated, they felt able to relax. Peter rubbed the sand from his eyes and looked around.

‘Hi,’ said Ebrahim gently.

The two boys looked at each other, and smiled feebly. They both looked like sand sculptures. Under any other circumstances they would have laughed heartily, but right now they didn’t have the heart.

‘Come on,’ said Ebrahim softly, standing and shaking the sand from his *thobe*.

‘Where are we going?’ Peter managed to say, feeling as though he’d lost all will.

‘We’re going to look for Cat,’ Ebrahim said simply. He set off to follow the direction of the storm. Peter knew that it was probably a wasted effort, but equally knew that they had to try. He started to trudge wearily after his friend.

They ignored the heat of the sun which was steadily increasing as they walked. They also ignored the fact that their throats were burning from lack of water. They had only one thought in their heads: find Cat. They tried to prepare themselves for what they might find.

The desert was very flat. This allowed them to see well into the distance. Anything, or anyone, lying on the sand would be fairly easy to spot. They spotted something: a bundle, lying motionless on the sand, about five hundred metres ahead of them.

‘Come on!’ said Ebrahim, and he started to run in the direction of the bundle. Peter had very mixed feelings. He knew what he wanted to find: he also knew what he didn’t want to find. The bundle in the sand was now close enough for Peter to see what looked like legs and a torso. Sticking up there appeared to be two thin desperate arms, reaching out – pleading for help. Peter watched as Ebrahim knelt beside the pathetic bundle. Peter’s

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heart was in his mouth. Tears welled in his eyes as he reached it, and realised that it wasn't his little sister. It was a gazelle, and the thin arms reaching towards the sky were horns. Peter knew that gazelles were fast, but even a gazelle could not outrun a sand storm. Peter watched as Ebrahim gently and solemnly dusted the sand from the animal's fur. Instinct told him that, unless this gazelle was hopelessly lost, they must be fairly close to civilisation. Perhaps Cat made it to a village, he thought, knowing that that would be a chance in a million. As the boys knelt together beside the dead gazelle, the sand behind the creature started to shift. They looked at each other quizzically as a hand pushed through the sand and a tearful eight-year-old voice said meekly: 'I thought you'd never find me.'

'Cat?' called Peter softly, hardly daring to believe his eyes. His sister, caked from head to foot in sand, started to sit up.

'Stay . . . perfectly . . . still,' Ebrahim suddenly hissed at her.

'Why? What?' she asked, going rigid nonetheless.

Peter then saw that his sister's ordeal was not over. Curled in the sand beside her was a snake, and it had seen her. Cat's instinct was to get up and run away as far as possible. Ebrahim must have realised this because he told her to stay where she was. The three friends waited to see what the snake intended to do. Cat froze in horror as she realised that it intended to attack her. It reared up its body and drew back its head ready to strike, then suddenly flew up into the air, seized in the vice-like beak of a falcon. Cat fainted.

Filled with relief, the boys watched the bird as it carried its prey high into the bright blue sky. Another falcon appeared as if from nowhere. It appeared to be under the impression that half of the snake belonged to it, even though it had played no part in the capture of the reptile. Swooping and whirling high in the sky the two falcons were engaged in an airborne game of tug-o-war, with the snake as the rope. Just as things were getting tense, a third falcon arrived and settled the matter by gripping the body of the snake in its fearsome talons and biting the snake clean in half with its razor-sharp beak.

Over the rim of a small nearby dune there appeared three men on horseback.

'Bedouins,' Ebrahim whispered under his breath. He did not seem happy to see them.



THE DESERT



CHAPTER 12

The Tribe

Don't say anything,' Ebrahim hissed at his two friends as the tribesmen drew closer. As they did so, Peter heard the sound of animals. Goats and sheep, being herded by other Bedouins, came into view around the edge of the dune, herded by boys and followed by men on camels. These men were not likely to be a dangerous raiding party, but a tribe moving north for the winter, Ebrahim realised. But he did not relax entirely; after all, he had no way of knowing which century they were in, let alone whether the men were even Qatari.

As they drew closer the sheep surrounded the three friends, sniffing at them curiously. The tribesmen kept a wary distance, but Peter suspected that they were every bit as curious as their sheep. After all, it can't be every day that a tribe of Bedouin come across three children in the middle of the desert. One of the tribe's small children who had been herding the sheep moved towards Cat. The shock of recent events seemed to have caught up with her, and she was shivering on the sand. Peter braced himself, ready to defend his sister if needs be, but equally aware that any action on his part could be disastrous for all three of them. But the boy meant them no harm. He could see that Cat was feeling the chill of the breeze that followed the sand storm through the torn shreds of what was left of her *thobe*, coupled with the chill of her near-death experience. The boy carefully removed the brightly patterned sleeveless jerkin he was wearing and held it out to Cat. Cat reached out her hand to accept the garment. As she went to thank the boy, Ebrahim stepped in and did it for her. The boy looked confused by what Ebrahim had said. He smiled at Cat and walked away.

A man in Bedouin robes, seated astride a white horse, appeared over the brow of the dune and then rode towards them, scattering sand as he did so. As the man drew closer Peter realised that they were in trouble. The headdress wound around the lower part of the man's face did not disguise him: the steely eyes gave him away. It was the unmistakable – though scar-less – face of the man they knew as Bu-Daryaah.

The man dismounted his horse and moved steadily towards them. His swaggering gait gave the impression that he was important, or at least seemed to think he was. Many of the other tribesmen were waiting to see what he would do. Bu-Daryaah moved towards the three friends. As he did so a look of recognition flickered across his unscarred face. The friends tensed as he quickened his step until he was face to face with them.

'You have something that belongs to me,' Bu-Daryaah told them. 'Hand it over.'

Before the boys could stop her Cat spoke out.

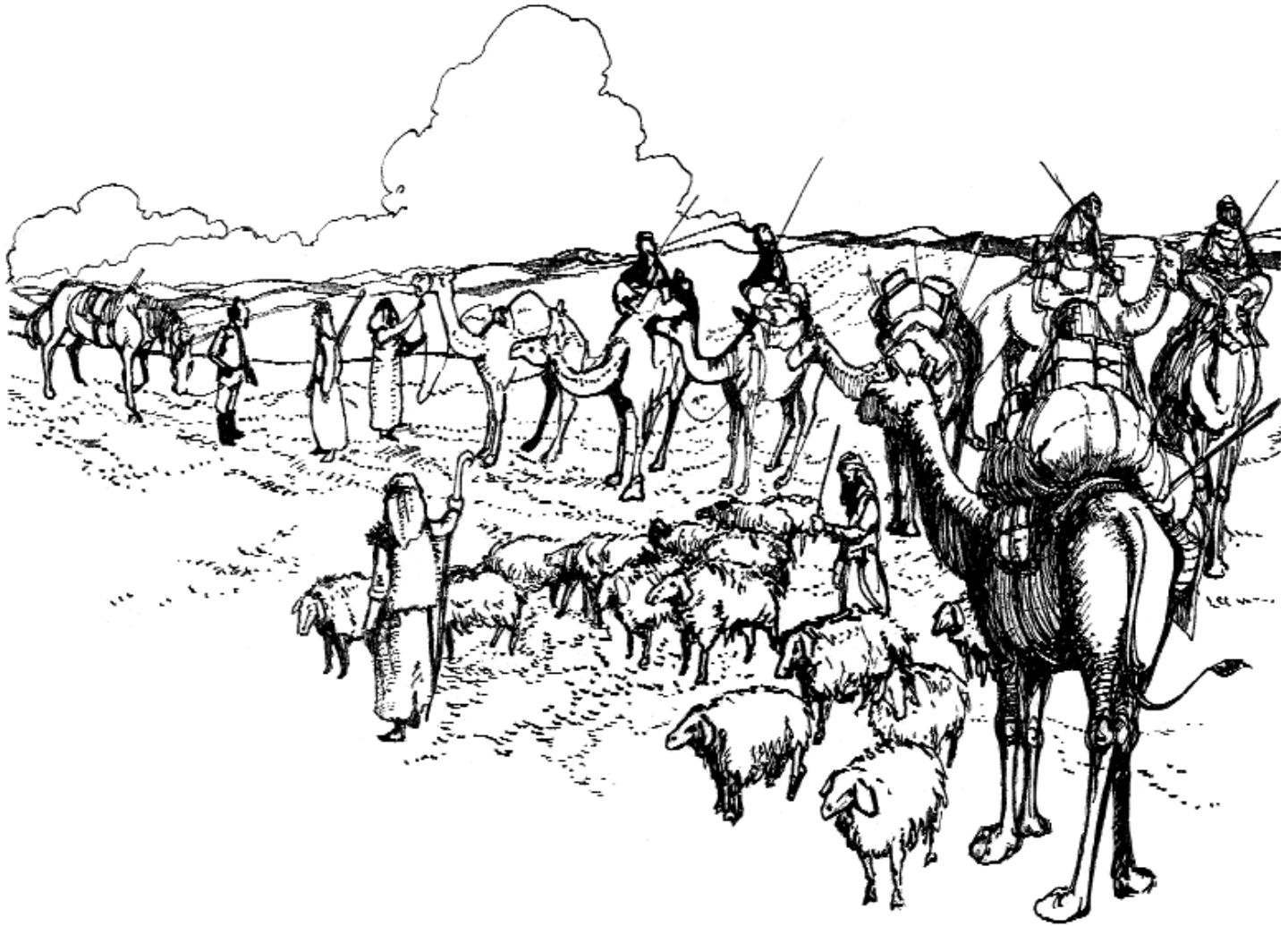
'No,' she said, far more bravely than she felt.

Around them the other tribesmen braced themselves, not knowing exactly what was going on. The sheep became restless.

'GIVE . . . IT . . . TO . . . ME!' Bu-Daryaah screamed at Cat.

The tribesmen took this as a sign that they should arm themselves, even though the 'foe' was only three small children. They drew their swords. Terrified, Cat pulled the pearl from the pocket in the remains of her *thobe* and prepared to blow on it. Bu-Daryaah threw himself at her. Cat stepped back and fell over one of the sheep. The pearl was sent flying into the air, as the breath was knocked out of Cat's lungs and sent skyward towards the falling pearl. . .

Everything went black.



CHAPTER 13

The Fort

The forts of Qatar were built to a similar design. If Ebrahim hadn't told him otherwise, Peter would have been convinced that they were in the fort that was – in modern times – the Qatar National Museum. But it was the fort at Al Wajbah, some fifteen kilometres outside of Doha, and Peter, Cat and Ebrahim were huddled behind a pile of cannonballs, on the battlements of the fort. An eerie silence surrounded them. The fort appeared to be standing there, abandoned, in the desert. Nonetheless, Peter had the distinct impression that they were not alone. He moved cautiously closer to the battlements and peered over. The fort was surrounded by stillness and silence – there was nothing, and nobody, around – apart from barren desert, dotted with sun-parched undergrowth. Peter stared into the undergrowth. Despite the fact that there was no wind at all, one of the bushes appeared to be moving.

'Why is there nobody here?' Cat asked, coming to join him.

'Sssh!' Peter snapped at her, pulling her down out of sight.

'Oi!' Cat protested.

'D'you want them to see you?' Peter hissed at her.

'Who?' she scoffed, 'there's nobody there!'

'Yes there is,' Ebrahim told the others. He nodded towards the distance. They followed his gaze and saw the desert being turned into a massive cloud of dust as a huge army headed towards the fort.

'Who's that?' Cat asked nervously.

'I'm not sure,' Ebrahim told her, 'but if it's who I think it is, we'd better make ourselves scarce!' Keeping his head down he headed towards an arch that led into the interior of the fort. Peter and Cat followed him deep into the belly of the building which, even though it was completely empty, was still forbidding. Reaching ground level they paused. Outside the arriving army was now very near. Then suddenly it stopped. There was an uneasy silence, as the children held their collective breath, staring at a door which was directly ahead of them: a door that would take them outside.

'What are we going to do?' Cat whispered nervously.

'Run!' Peter replied as the door burst open and a soldier wearing the uniform of the Ottoman Army burst through it. Cat and Ebrahim scattered, but Peter failed to take his

own advice and stood staring at the soldier, who seemed equally nonplussed. Beyond the soldier Peter suddenly saw the bushes burst into life as the Qatari forces revealed themselves. The Turkish soldier ran at Peter wielding a sword. Then he crumpled to the ground as a shot rang out. As he fell a Qatari soldier stepped over him and yelled at the children.

‘What are you doing?’ He demanded. ‘Do you want the Ottomans to kill you?’

‘What year is it?’ Ebrahim asked, realising that this was a strange question in the middle of a battle.

‘What?’ said the soldier incredulously. ‘Where did you come from? Out of the sky? It’s 1893, of course! Now get out of sight!’ With that the man disappeared back into the battle. The friends didn’t need telling twice, and as they headed through the winding corridors to comparative safety, Ebrahim explained the significance of the year 1893, and the fact that the pearl had taken them into the heart of the most decisive battle of Qatar’s struggle against the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans had sought to impose direct control on Qatar for some years, but Sheikh Jasim had opposed them, peacefully. In February 1893 the Wali of Basra arrived in Doha, claiming that he wanted talks with Jasim to resolve their differences.

‘But he’d brought a huge army with him,’ Ebrahim explained as they huddled in hiding, ‘a regiment of infantry and at least three hundred cavalry.’

‘Doesn’t sound much like he wanted to talk to me,’ Peter commented.

‘No – and it didn’t to Sheikh Jasim either. In fact he’d been tipped off that the Wali intended to arrest him.’

‘What did he do?’ Peter asked, getting caught up in the story.

‘He came here, to Wajbah. The Wali insisted that Jasim should go to Doha, but Sheikh Jassin sent his brother Sheikh Ahmad to negotiate with the Wali instead. This angered the Wali, who took Sheikh Ahmad and several other important Qatari men prisoner. Then he sent his army here – to Wajbah.’

‘That’s them fighting outside I suppose,’ Peter commented.

‘Yes,’ Ebrahim confirmed, ‘but we should be safe in here, as long as we all stick together – eh Cat?’

Cat didn’t reply. She was nowhere to be seen.

Outside the fort the Ottoman forces were retreating. Cheers went up from the Qatari army. Many Qatari’s had died willingly to protect their country. The victory was their posthumous reward.

‘Where’s Cat?’ Peter demanded.

‘How should I know?’ Ebrahim protested.

‘This whole thing is starting to freak me out,’ Peter said. ‘Travelling in time, the pearl. Then there’s that man – Bu-Daryaah or whatever he’s called. Who is he? How come he can turn up wherever and whenever he pleases? Why is he so obsessed with that pearl?’

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Why . . . ? Peter ran out of questions – things were way too confusing. There was only one really important question right now: where was Cat?

Cat had no idea what had happened. One minute she was hiding in the fort, the next she was heading off to who knows where, drawn by some irresistible force. She had found her way out of the fort, and joined the retreating Ottoman forces as they headed towards Doha.

The clear waters of the Gulf stretched out from the shore of Doha. Sheikh Ahmad was being held prisoner with the other Qatari nobles on an Ottoman gunboat out in the bay. The Ottomans knew that Jasim would not abandon his brother, or anyone else for that matter. The Sheikh's sense of honour and duty were part of his Qatari code. The Ottoman leaders hoped to overcome their ignominious defeat at Wajbah by luring Jasim to Doha – where they planned to defeat him once and for all. But they had not taken into consideration the genius of Sheikh Jasim. Before he had retreated to Fort Wajbah he had ordered the wells to be blocked. Without water the Ottoman army would be unable to function. Take away water and you take away will. Unaware of this, the retreating Ottoman army entered the Doha fort in their hundreds. Cat realised that she could remain unnoticed among the throng of soldiers, women and children bustling around the fort. One woman smiled at her from behind her *battulah* – Cat had never seen such kind eyes.

'Take care,' the lady told her, in almost perfect English. Despite her confusion, Cat suddenly felt very calm and perfectly safe: perfectly safe that is that is until a hand gripped her shoulder...

Back at Al Wajbah, the boys were feeling desperate.

'We have to find her,' Ebrahim insisted.

'I know,' Peter told him, irritably, 'but how?'

Outside the fort they heard the sound of *ardah* – war drumming – accompanied by the clamber of soldiers and cavalry, whinnying horses and snorting camels. The Qatari army was on the move, and this time there would be no furtive hiding in bushes.

'Come on,' Ebrahim said, starting to leave the room.

'Where to?' Peter asked, following.

'Doha of course!' his friend called back, breaking into a run.

'Are you mad?' Peter yelled, running to catch up.

'Don't worry,' Ebrahim laughed, 'I know what happens!'

Ebrahim said nothing to Peter, but he too felt drawn by the same force that had drawn Cat. He ran out of the fort in the direction of Doha, not hearing Peter's cries as he tripped and fell down a flight of steps, lying at the foot and writhing in agony.

Ebrahim grabbed the proffered hand of a man sitting astride a camel and was hoisted into the saddle behind him. The pair sped off to witness the humiliation of the Ottoman

forces at the hands of the man they were proud to call their leader – Sheikh Jasim.

Back in Fort Wajbah Peter struggled to his feet and hobbled outside, just in time to see the cloud of sand thrown up by the departing Qatari army.

There was a jubilant atmosphere within the Qatari army as they headed for Doha. This was an army of tribesmen who were bursting with confidence, having just snatched a glorious victory from the jaws of almost certain defeat. They had faced a superior army back at Wajbah – an army of the great Ottoman Empire – but their loyalty and will had won the day. Now banners waved as the order was given to draw to a halt just out of the range of the Doha fort's cannon.

One of their number didn't stop. Once the camel driver had dismounted, the boy to whom he had offered a lift pressed the beast forward and away. The protests of the camel owner were drowned by the celebrations of the soldiers. Ebrahim skirted around the edge of the fort, and then dropped off the camel and onto the sand. Moving stealthily, he approached the fort and found an entrance towards the rear. He was not to know that as soon as he entered the fort, he would fall into the hands of the man they knew only as Bu-Daryaah.

Peter was not the only one left behind. Outside the Wajbah Fort he found a lone donkey, looking abandoned and lost. It was not his idea of the perfect transport, but Peter decided that it would have to do: he had to catch up with Cat and Ebrahim: he knew instinctively that they were in great danger.

'Keep still, won't you!' he complained, as the donkey kept moving every time he tried to mount it. Eventually he was more or less settled in the saddle when the donkey headed off towards Doha.

'Slow down!' Peter yelled, as he bounced around in the rough saddle on the back of the manic donkey.

'Do you know why this pearl is so important?' Bu-Daryaah asked Cat and Ebrahim as they sat alone in one of the small rooms at the back of the fort. He now wore the uniform of an Ottoman officer, but the weather-beaten face and steely eyes were unmistakable.

'Call me Khan, by the way,' he told them.

Both Cat and Ebrahim could think of several things they'd like to call him: Khan was not one of them!

'This is the *Pearl of Gilgamesh*,' Khan continued. 'Gilgamesh was the fifth ruler of Iraq, believed to be the very first pearl diver. He was seeking the pearl that would bring him immortality.'

'Did he find it?' Cat asked. After all, they weren't going anywhere – she might as well ask questions.

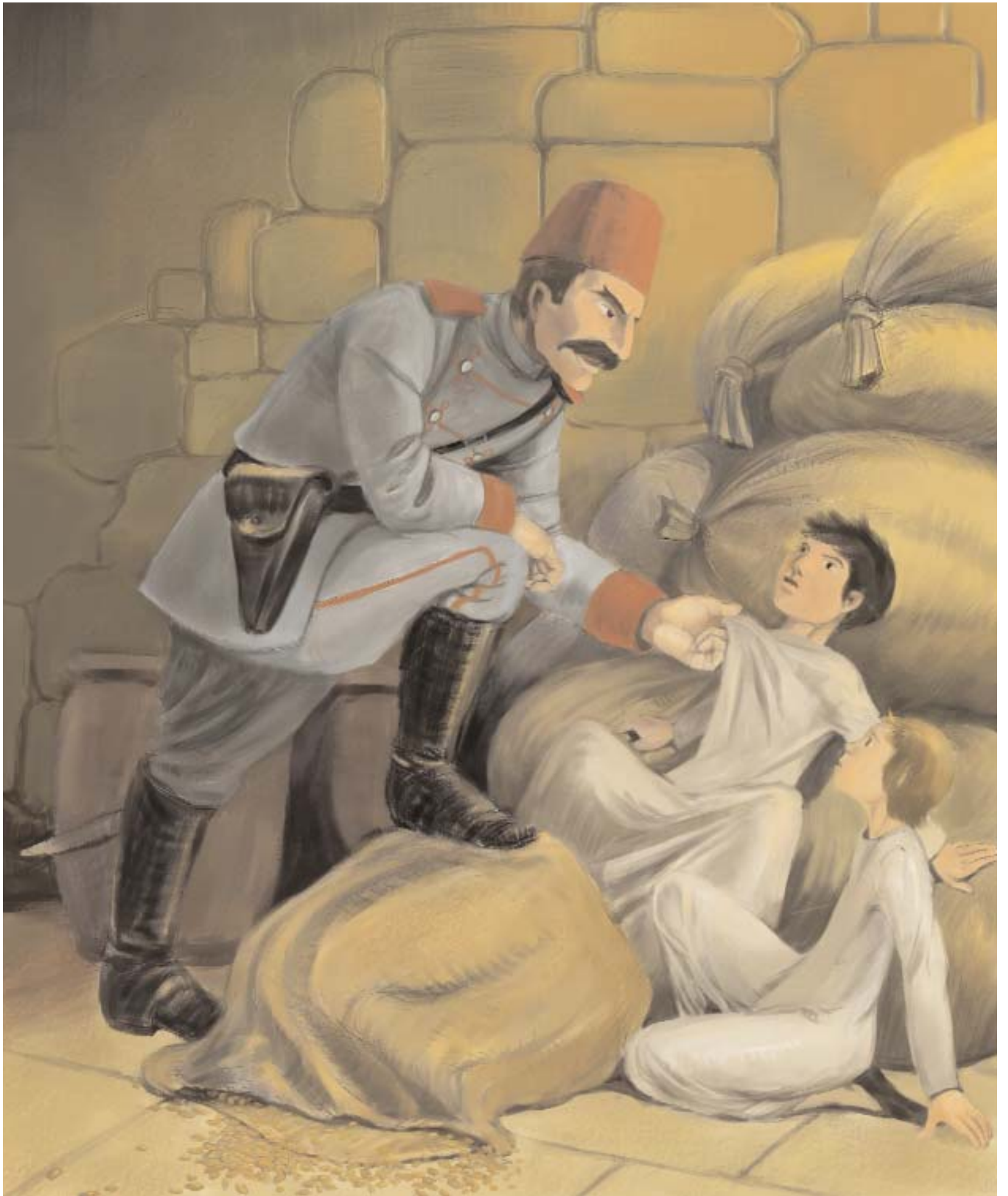
'Yes he did,' Khan told then, looking affectionately at the egg-shaped blue pearl as he turned it in his fingers. 'But then he lost it.'



‘How?’ Ebrahim wanted to know, but still trying to give the impression of not wanting to hear anything that this man had to say.

‘Silly really,’ Khan told them. ‘Having almost died diving for it, he put it on the sand while he rested, and a snake swallowed it . . .’

‘We have no need of gunpowder,’ A soldier was telling his bombardiers as Peter arrived unnoticed, perched precariously on the back of the donkey. Peter recognised the soldier as the man who had saved his life back at Al Wajbah – the man he discovered was called



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Mohamed. Having shaken the dust from his robes, Mohamed now appeared far more noble and important than he had when Peter first encountered him at Al Wajbah. His battle-scarred *thobe* was covered with an embroidered *zoboun*, and he looked every inch like a sheikh. Listening to him, Peter discovered that the Qataris had no intention of attacking the fort, which came as a great relief to him, because he was convinced that his sister and his pal were inside it. When the Qatari army eventually entered the Doha fort they found that – as they expected – the Ottoman army had abandoned it. Those soldiers that did remain in the fort were too badly wounded to be moved. Orders were given to tend to the wounded, showing them the respect that people would come to take for granted from the new emerging Qatari nation.

Peter moved through the Doha fort in search of his sister and his friend, going desperately from empty room to empty room, stepping over the debris of occupation. Cat and Ebrahim were nowhere to be found: and time was running out.

CHAPTER 14

The Challenge

Mohamed listened intently as Peter explained the situation. He had decided to leave out the time travelling bits and the magic of the pearl – if indeed it was magic. Unfortunately without those parts the story lost most of its impact. Fortunately Mohamed seemed to grasp the desperation that Peter felt. Once Peter had finished, the noble Qatari thought for a moment.

‘What you are describing seems to me to be a matter of honour,’ he said, slowly and deliberately. ‘This man has taken something that belongs to you. He has no right to do this.’

Peter was about to interrupt and say: ‘What about my sister?’ when Mohamed continued.

‘More importantly – much more importantly – he has taken something you cherish – a friendship.’

Again Peter wanted to interject. Again Mohamed pre-empted him.

‘And far greater than any of this, of course, is the dishonour he has done to you by abducting a member of your family. This cannot be tolerated.’

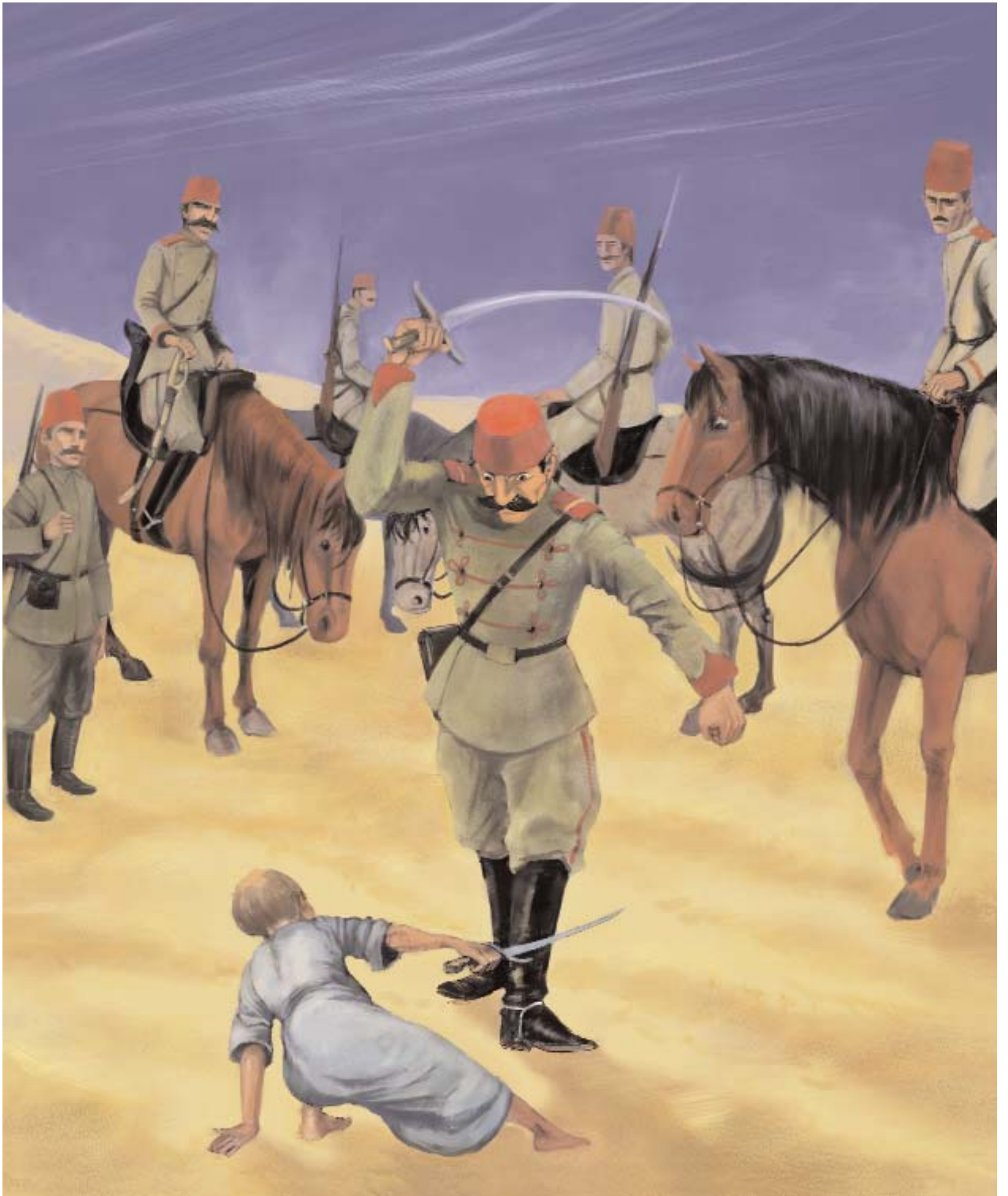
At last, thought Peter, he’s come to the important part.

‘For this he must be challenged,’ continued Mohamed. ‘He must be made to return what he has taken. That is right and just.’ Peter wondered what form this challenge would take? Perhaps Mohamed had a plan.

‘I will help you find this man. Then he must be challenged,’ the Qatari noble told him.

It took very little time for Mohamed, Peter and a select band of Qatari warriors to catch up with the retreating Ottoman army. Mohamed sent ahead a messenger, and very soon afterwards a small band of Ottoman soldiers were approaching them on horseback, led by Bu-Daryaah, the man the other children now knew as Khan. The face and eyes were unmistakable, but there was still no scar. How did he get it? Peter wondered. Also in the group Peter spotted what appeared to be two children sharing a horse. As they drew closer he was relieved to see that they were Cat and Ebrahim, and that they appeared unharmed – at least for the moment. Khan dismounted from his magnificent steed.

‘He has accepted your challenge,’ Mohamed told Peter. What challenge? Peter wondered. His blood froze in his veins as Khan removed his army jacket and belt, then took a large scimitar from a sheath strapped to his horse’s saddle. He’s going to kill me,



Peter thought, horrified. He turned to Mohamed in consternation. Mohamed calmly removed his own modest sword, turned it around expertly in his hand, then handed it to Peter – hilt first. As he did so he leant forward in his saddle and spoke quietly into Peter's ear.

'If you have learnt nothing else today – you must have learnt that it is not the biggest army that wins the battle.'

Yes, thought Peter, winning a battle when your army is outnumbered is one thing, defeating a man twice your size with a sword equally huge is something else! The reality of his desperate situation became clear as Khan made a few preliminary sweeps through the air. The deathly whistle of the razor-sharp scimitar filled Peter's heart with dread.

'Remember,' Mohamed told him, 'you don't have to kill a man if you can block his well.'

The logic of this was lost on Peter, and he was just about to say as much when – with a blood-curdling scream – Khan rushed at him, sweeping the deathly blade towards his neck. Instinctively Peter dropped to the sand, rolled and sprung back to his feet, quickly side-stepping as the blade dug into the sand inches from his toes. The Ottoman soldiers were now whipped into a frenzy. Their recent defeats at Doha and Wajbah still smarted, and they were desperate to see blood on the sand – even if it was only the blood of a strange boy who spoke in a foreign tongue. The Qatari warriors remained totally impassive.

Peter made a couple of half-hearted passes with his weapon, neither of which caused Khan any danger, but they did amuse the Ottoman soldiers, who seemed to have relaxed their guard on Ebrahim and Cat in favour of the entertainment being provided by Peter. Peter stared intently at Khan, trying to predict where he would attack next – and preparing himself for evasive action. Peter threw himself this way and that, rolling, twisting, turning and using all his Karate skills to avoid the now manic slashing of Khan's scimitar. The Turks whooped in delight. Khan got angrier and angrier. The Qataris remained motionless. Ebrahim held his breath as Cat crept closer and closer to the belt lying on the sand: the belt abandoned by Khan: the belt containing the Pearl of Gilgamesh.

Avoiding death is an exhausting business, Peter realised as he struggled to breathe and stay upright. He had no doubt that if he fell over, that would be it: Khan would finish him off. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cat edging slowly closer to the belt. As she slipped her hand into the pouch on the belt, Peter was momentarily distracted. It was just long enough for Khan to take a mighty swipe at him. Peter dodged backwards, tripped and fell onto his back.

'Get up, Peter,' yelled Ebrahim, drawing the attention of the Ottoman soldiers to him.

Cat's hand moved further into the pouch as Khan stood above the prone body of Peter and raised the deadly scimitar above his head, preparing to bring it down in a mighty sweep that would cut the boy in half.

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‘NO!’ yelled Ebrahim as he braced himself to watch his new best friend die.

‘Yes!’ whispered Cat as she removed the pearl from the pouch and started to raise it to her lips.

Khan turned in the direction of Ebrahim’s yell, and his steely eye caught Cat holding the pearl. Peter seized this split second to kick out as hard as he could, connecting with the hilt of the scimitar and causing it to twist back into the face of his nemesis.

‘Aaagh!’ screamed Khan as the blade cut into his face from his forehead, across his left eye and onto his cheek. He fell to the sand, spilling his blood.

‘Peter,’ screamed Cat, ‘come on!’

Peter threw himself in the direction of his sister. Ebrahim broke free of the Ottoman soldiers who were trying to restrain him. Mohamed smiled wisely as the three friends clung to each other and Cat blew on the pearl. . .

Everything went black.

CHAPTER 15

The Return

Time stands still when you time-travel. That was the conclusion Peter had reached, anyway, once he realised that his parents had not missed him and Cat. Maybe it said more about them than it did about time-travel, but he was just relieved to be home. The only thing that had changed was the fact that his parents had relented and now they had the internet at home.

‘You’ll be able to send messages to Jack,’ Dad told him.

He omitted to say that he’d put parental control software on the computer, which meant that Peter would only be allowed on-line for about half an hour a day, but it was a step in the right direction. Peter couldn’t wait to tell his best mate back in England about the pearl and all that had happened. The big question was: would Jack believe a word of it? Probably not, Peter decided. He realised that he still thought of Jack as his best pal, though maybe that should now be ‘Best Pal in England’. His best pal in Qatar was definitely Ebrahim.

He suddenly remembered that he and Cat had arranged to go with Ebrahim to Souq Waqif that evening. That was another thing, Peter realised: he’d come to the conclusion that Cat wasn’t too bad – for a little sister.

‘Maybe the sun has finally got to me,’ Peter told himself as he got ready to go out.

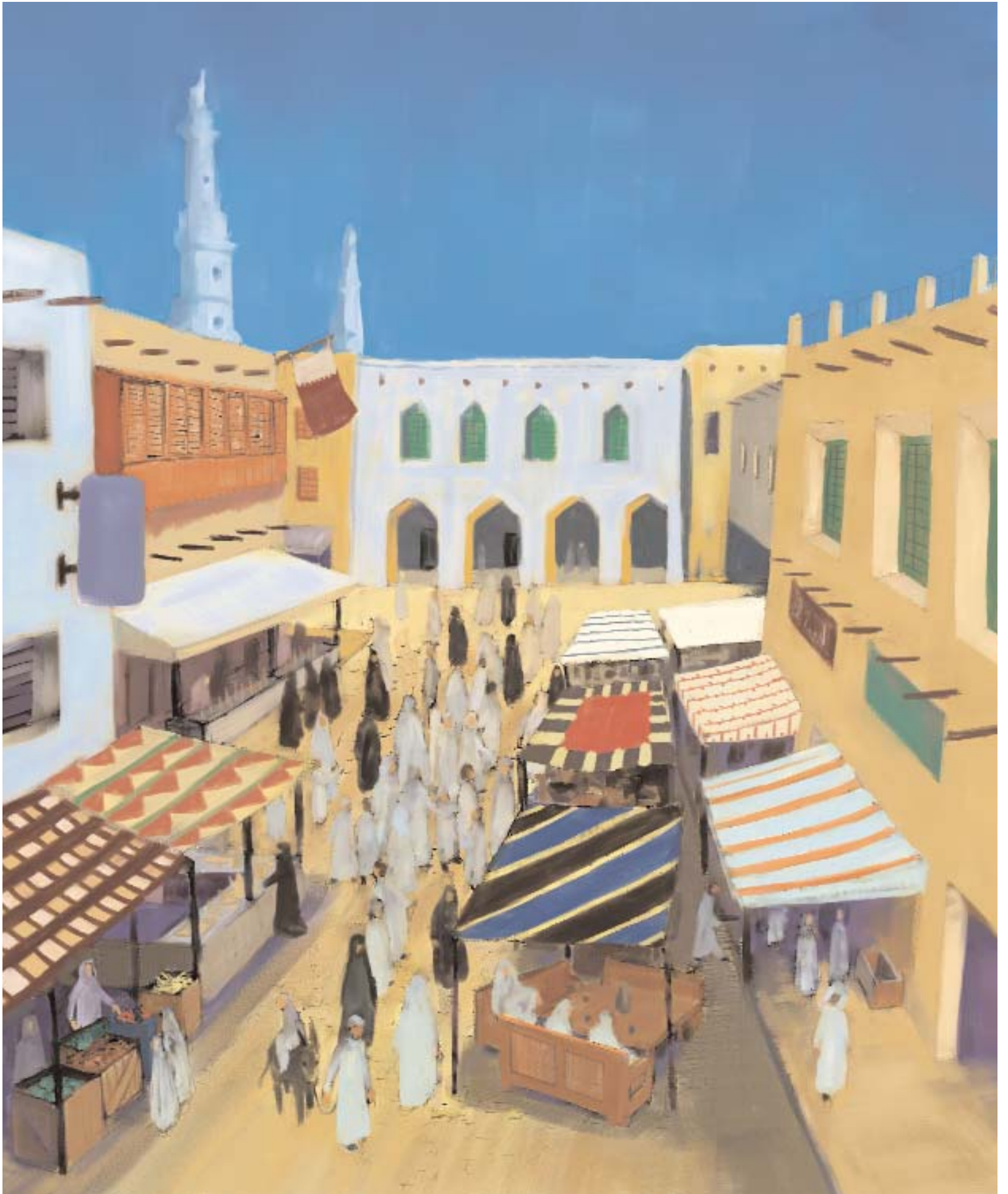
Ebrahim’s father Hamad drove them to the souq. It was already bustling, and so Hamad suggested that they should go ahead into the souq while he parked the car.

‘But don’t run and – and don’t get into trouble,’ he warned them through the open car window as he headed towards the parking spaces. The three friends moved into the bustling marketplace. Peter loved the souq. The smells, the sights, the people, even the lone donkey giving rides. The donkey suddenly looked familiar somehow. Peter found himself thinking the impossible, as the donkey appeared to wink at him: maybe Bu-Daryaah was not the only one who could travel through time?

They sat down at one of the tables outside a cafe. An enthusiastic waiter immediately appeared. Ebrahim explained politely that they were waiting for his father and the waiter retreated, equally politely. There was so much to talk about, so much had happened, but so much of it made no sense.

‘Well,’ Cat suddenly said, ‘we now know who gave Khan his scar.’

‘Me,’ Peter agreed, adding, ‘and we know who put the pearl in the pocket of the jerkin.’



‘Me,’ Cat agreed, ‘and I’ve still got it.’

So saying she pulled the huge pearl out of her pocket and handed it to Peter.

‘What are we going to do with it?’ Ebrahim asked.

‘Give it to me!’ said a menacing voice behind them.

‘RUN!’ Peter yelled, instinctively. They ran.

Finally Hamad had parked the car. He’d been amused by a group of tourists who were hot and grumpy and getting very frustrated by the crowded car park. Hamad smiled to himself, wondering how long it would take them to realise that getting stressed wouldn’t make parking any easier. Hamad smiled and shook his head as he left the irate tourists behind him. Stress was a waste of time he decided, heading off to the café where he had agreed to meet his son and his son’s friends. When he got there and found that they were nowhere around, he felt stress creeping up on him.

The three friends had split up, running as fast as they could through the narrow lanes of the souq. They dodged past shopkeepers offering souvenirs, food, clothes, even birds and rabbits. A shopkeeper shouted at him angrily as Peter dodged past a pile of pots and pans, knocking them over. Peter muttered a breathless ‘sorry’ as he rushed on, but the man wasn’t impressed.

‘Oh well,’ Peter told himself, ‘he’ll have forgotten me by the time I go back.’

Then he looked ahead and saw that his route was blocked by Khan – Peter was going to have to go back past the angry pot seller sooner than expected!

Cat dashed around one of the streets on the outside of the souq. She raced past the donkey, which gave her a casual glance then went back to the seemingly endless task of giving rides to small children. She turned a corner and smacked straight into someone’s chest. ‘There you are,’ said a familiar voice.

Peter backed away from Khan, who was moving towards him. It appeared to Peter that Khan was reluctant to openly chase him. Perhaps he didn’t want to draw attention to himself. After all, a grown man chasing children around the souq would raise a few eyebrows. Peter turned away from Khan, then realised there was another reason why Khan was in no hurry to chase him – the route behind Peter was blocked. A man who seemed strangely familiar was walking towards him. Peter couldn’t be sure, but could it be that he was one of the motley crew that served on the pearl ship? Surely that wasn’t possible, Peter thought. Possible or not, he had to do something; but what? There was no clear escape route. Peter tried to work out which man he might be able to run past without being stopped – Khan or the pearl diver? Then the decision was made for him: ‘in here, quickly,’ said a voice behind him. He didn’t bother to look – he just followed the voice.

Ebrahim came into the end of the ally and saw Khan up ahead. Fortunately he had not been spotted. He slipped into a nearby falconry shop.

Further up the ally, Peter found himself inside a clothing store. There were all manner of materials and garments. Rugs and cushions covered the walls and floor. The patterns were familiar: he knew that they were traditional Qatari designs. He also knew who had

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saved him. A lady with kind eyes peering out through her *battulah* ushered him into a back room. Cat was already there.

'Hi,' she said. Seeing Peter's confusion she added: 'it's OK – this lady is a friend.' She didn't bother to explain that she had met the lady before – in another time. Things were already weird enough.

Further up the road, Ebrahim was having a much tougher time.

'I'm just looking, honestly,' Ebrahim told the shop assistant. The assistant was persistent. Business was slow, and he was in the mood for a haggle.

'OK – half price, and I am robbing myself,' the assistant told him.

'No you're not,' said the shop owner, appearing behind him. 'You're robbing me!'

The owner and his assistant then proceeded to have an 'argument' so good natured that Ebrahim assumed that it was being staged for his benefit. The boy took the opportunity to slip out of the shop and along the lane. He moved cautiously. There was no sign of Khan, but he couldn't be too careful. He paused for a moment outside a shop. As he did so a familiar hand reached out and pulled him inside.

Hamad was beside himself with worry. He was also angry that his son had disobeyed him. 'How could he do this?' Hamad kept muttering to himself, all the while thinking 'I hope nothing has happened to him.'

'You cannot keep it, you know,' the lady with kind eyes suddenly said.

'The pearl?' Cat queried. 'You're right of course.'

'Good luck to you,' was the reply. The lady ushered all three children to the door of the shop. 'The coast looks clear now,' she said. She turned back into the shop and was gone.

'Where have you been?' Hamad demanded as the three children emerged. 'I have been worried sick about you! Do not ever do that again!' And then to Peter: 'Hello Peter, are you alright?' in a much more rational tone, not wanting Peter to imagine that he ever lost his temper, even though he just had.

'We are absolutely fine!' Ebrahim assured his father, 'aren't we Cat? Cat? Where's Cat?'

'No!' they heard Cat yell. Looking up the friends saw her on a high balcony above a nearby restaurant. Khan was holding firmly onto her arm.

'Stay here,' Peter told his friend as he ran towards the restaurant.

'Stay here!' Hamad told his son, as Ebrahim tried to follow his friend. The pair watched nervously as Peter arrived on the balcony to confront Khan.

'So,' Khan said calmly, not bothering to disguise the scorn in his voice, 'you come to challenge me again, do you?'

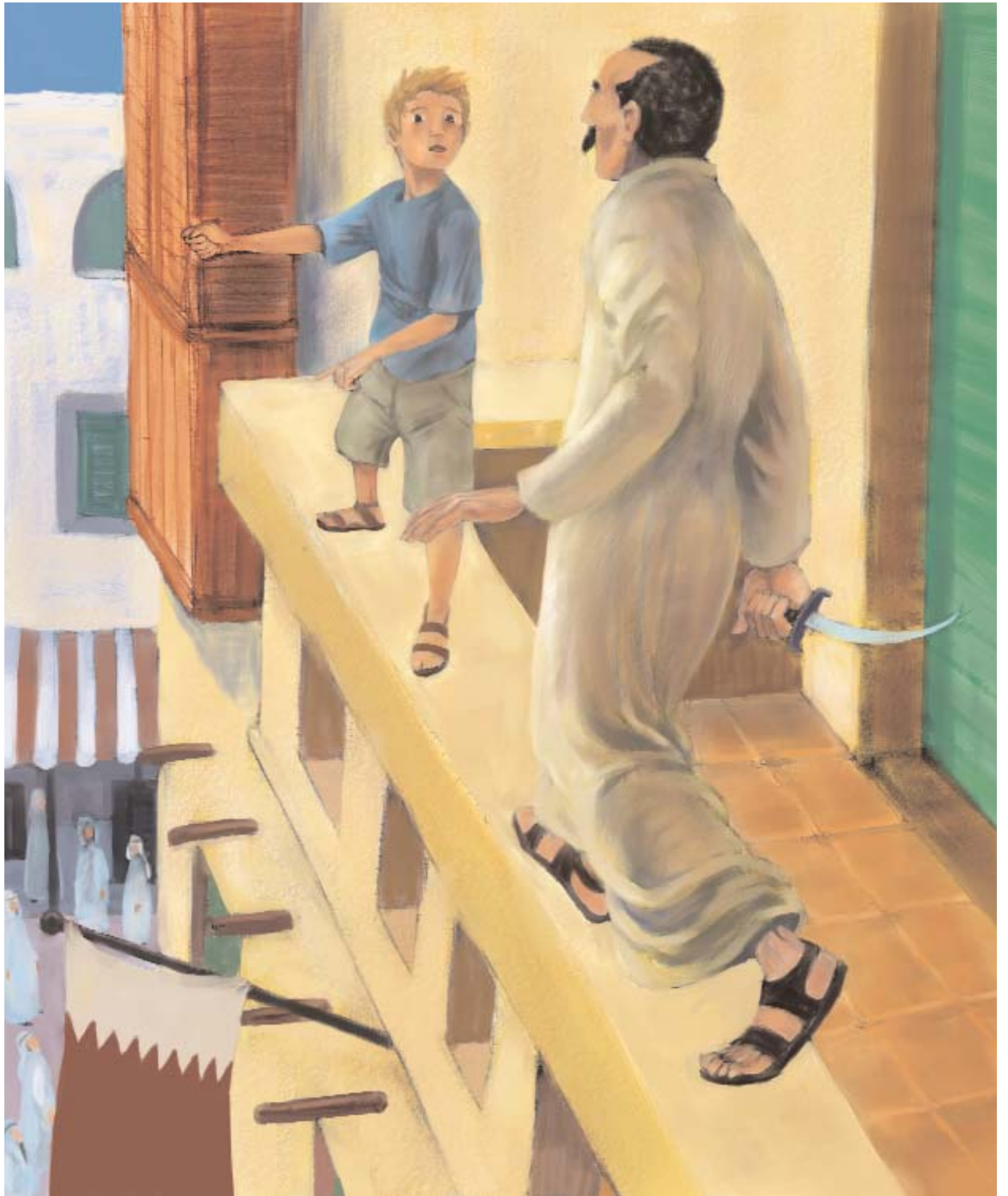
'Don't be silly,' Peter told him, 'you haven't got a huge scimitar this time.'

'No,' Khan agreed, 'no scimitar.' He pulled a massive knife from under his *thobe*.

'Give him the pearl, Peter' Cat said quietly.

'Better do as she suggests,' Khan taunted, 'scars never look attractive on a female.'

Just in case Peter didn't realise the implication of this last remark, Khan moved the knife to the side of Cat's face. Cat flinched, but tried to stay calm.



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‘Let her go first,’ Peter said, ‘and I’ll let you have the pearl.’

Peter produced the pearl and turned it slowly between his fingers, tempting the big man.

‘You are a man of honour,’ Khan told him, with little more than a note of irony.

He let Cat go. She immediately ran to Peter’s side of the balcony.

‘Go and join Ebrahim and his father,’ Peter told her.

She didn’t move.

‘Now!’ he barked at her. This time she didn’t wait to be told again. She ran down the flight of stairs at the back of the balcony and out through the restaurant.

‘Now, the pearl, please,’ Khan said calmly.

Peter wasn’t fooled. He could hear the menace in Khan’s voice, and knew only too well what the man was capable of. Peter climbed onto the stone rail that ran around the rim of the balcony. He held out the pearl.

‘Here.’

Khan glared at him, then smiled. He climbed onto the other end of the rail. In the street below Hamad, Ebrahim and Cat were too tense to even breathe.

‘Now,’ repeated Khan, holding out his hand, ‘the pearl.’

There was no longer any pretence of friendliness in his voice. His tone had resumed its customary chill. Peter used his Karate training to stop himself shaking. He held the pearl out over the edge of the balcony.

‘Drop that knife,’ Peter told him.

‘Or you’ll do what, exactly?’ Khan asked, ‘drop the pearl onto the street below? That is not at all likely, is it?’

Peter knew that the man was right. He hadn’t been through everything he’d been through to risk damaging the pearl now. He was equally certain that he couldn’t risk handing it to Khan, just in case the man was right about it.

Khan was losing his patience.

‘The pearl – now!’ he snapped.

He made a lunge at Peter with the knife. Peter side-stepped, throwing the pearl up into the air.

‘NO!’ yelled Khan, trying to regain his balance. The Pearl dropped into Khan’s hand as he lost his footing and started to topple from the balcony. In the street below, Hamad turned away – shielding Cat’s eyes against his chest. Ebrahim continued to watch in horror.

‘Yes!’ Khan shouted triumphantly, as he toppled. The look on his face was serene. Peter realised that Khan was totally convinced that the pearl would save his life – after all, it granted immortality according TO the legend. Khan appeared to be falling in slow motion, the deep belief in the legend etched into his craggy face.

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Then it happened: a flagpole sticking out from the high building hit the back of Khan's hand. He gasped as the pearl slipped out of his fingers. His expression turned to one of abject terror as he fell to almost certain death. Peter watched in horror as the man continued to fall. Whatever the man had done, the boy thought, nobody deserved such a violent end. Fate seemed to agree. Khan fell towards the car park, hitting the roof of the car belonging to the irate tourists, who were attempting to back out and go home. The impact caused the air to be driven from Khan's lungs into the path of the falling pearl. Peter watched in amazement as the man known as *Bu-Daryyah* – the man they now knew as Khan – vanished into the warm thin air of the Qatar night. Ebrahim retrieved the pearl whilst the father of the 'tribe' of irate tourists checked his roof for dents whilst examining his brain for an explanation of the disappearing man.

CHAPTER 16

The Future Assured

We really can't keep it, you know,' Peter was telling Cat as she turned the pearl over and over in her hand.

'I know,' she said wistfully. 'Do you think the legend's true?' she asked.

'Are you volunteering to test it?' Peter smirked.

'No way!' she protested, play-slapping his arm.

'I see you two are back to being brother and sister,' said Ebrahim, as he came into the room carrying the woollen jerkin that Cat had been given by the Bedouin boy. They were back at the Qatar National Museum, helping Mansour with his 'stock-taking'. Mansour was jollier than normal. Apparently the man they called Bu-Daryaah had not shown up for work. He seemed to have disappeared completely, and Mansour did not seem to be missing him.

'Do you think your uncle would let me keep this jerkin?' Cat asked.

'I don't see why not,' Ebrahim told her, 'but you've got a job to do first.'

Reluctantly Cat placed the pearl back into the pocket of the jerkin, then took the garment to Mansour, leaving the boys to get back to their sword fight.

'If you want it,' Mansour told Cat when she asked him about the jerkin. 'It is very smelly though. I'll just check the pockets . . .'

'I think he's found the pearl,' Peter remarked, mid-fight, as Mansour's excited scream rent the dusty air of the museum.

'You could be right,' Ebrahim agreed, taking advantage of his friend's lack of concentration to gently poke him under the arm with his sword.

'You're dead,' he said.

'No I'm not,' Peter protested, 'I'm being protected by the pearl.'

'Whatever,' Ebrahim replied, using an expression he'd picked up from his English friend.

'There he is on the front page!' Peter's Dad was saying as he stared at the local newspaper.

The picture was of Mansour, posing smartly beside the Pearl of Gilgamesh, at the Museum of Islamic Art. Standing beside the proud uncle was an official from the museum, resplendent in traditional robes, but wearing a name-tag. It said 'Mohamed'. His wise

smile seemed very familiar. The article explained that the pearl represented Qatar, and that it was there for everyone to share and enjoy. And – just like Qatar – it was precious. Peter knew that the pearl was in safe hands. He also knew how hard the pearl had been to hold on to. He'd learnt a little about how hard the Qataris had struggled to create their present State, under the guidance of the great Sheikh Jasim. But – also like the pearl – it would last forever, as long as it was loved and respected. Peter was determined to be a part of the long and prosperous future of his newly adopted country.

'So,' said his father, 'do you think you could get to like this place?'

Peter shrugged. 'Might do,' he said, casually.

Sometimes it doesn't pay to tell your parents!



