

The Axum Empire 614 CE

Abuna Lubba ran for the back of the monastery, his sandals echoed off the worn stone floor. It was the first time he had run since he was a young man and nearly every joint in his body protested. *May the nine saints give me strength*, he thought, as their judgmental faces painted on the wall flashed past. He prayed they would forgive him for not taking the time to remove his sandals.

It had taken almost eight days for word to reach him and he could only hope there was still time.

A plan began to form in Lubba's mind as this new predicament forced him to focus beyond his daily routine. Religion was often like that-no change for hundreds of years and then, upheaval. What the future brought was now in question, for him and his beloved church. Doubt was a leader's Achilles heel and he pushed those thoughts away.

Over the last sixty-two years, Lubba had seen his black hair go white and his shoulders slump. He had lost his wife many years ago to a sickness that swept through the region, leaving few standing. Somehow, he had endured, moving forward; day after day, building a regimen that was as efficient as it was comfortable-now all that was threatened.

His mind never slowed, always pushing him to do more and better. Today he would need it to be at its very best. *Think!*

Tallow candles illuminated a collection of icons and relics displayed on the chapel's altar. The large carved stone pedestal, that bore the symbol of truth on its front—a swastika.

He looked over the pieces in front of him—gold, silver, even, once precious, iron. In the back, a stone carving of a goshawk caught his eye. It was a local bird of prey that loved to hang out on the chapel's cross outside. Lubba reached for it, steadying his shaking hand, as he pulled the carved stone from its perch. He had been present when the statue had been carved, made for a special purpose that only he knew. Now it would have a second purpose.

The statue was slightly shorter than his forearm and made of red sandstone. Its solid square base supported carved legs perched on a branch. The torso was upright, with facial features including its distinctive hooked beak. Two wings were raised from the sides, connected to the torso with small wooden dowels hammered through holes in the wings and body. The wings were raised and had feather-carved relief on the front, making the bird look angelic in its pose. The artist had neglected to carve any detail on the back, leaving it smooth to the touch.

“Perfect,” Lubba voiced to himself as he looked over the stone effigy, his plan slowly solidifying.

He sat on the stone step in front of the altar and pulled out a sharp steel awl from his robe with his bony fingers. Using the sunlight from a small carved window, Lubba started to scratch out a hurried message on the backside of the bird—one letter and then another.

As Abuna, or patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in this area, Lubba was responsible for the worship and messaging his priests shared with their congregations. He was also responsible for the treasury. Every religion needed money to operate and grow—money that had to be collected, shared, used and most importantly, saved. The practice of hiding valuables

in certain churches known as, *vault churches*, was common in the area. How and where funds were hidden within them was a closely guarded secret-his secret.

Lubba looked down at his work. The letters were uneven but clearly visible on the back of the statue. Two lines running from one wing, then across the torso and ending on the other wing. It would have to do. He forced out the wooden dowels that held the two wings in place and separated them from the body.

Footsteps approached and Lubba looked up.

A young man in a worn cotton shamma, or traditional white robe, paused when he saw Lubba sitting on a step in the small chapel with what looked like a broken sculpture.

“Your Excellency, we must hurry.”

Lubba looked up and smiled at the young, always eager priest. The white brimless kofia on his head was askew and sweat beaded across his forehead. “We must first find our path before we rush forward, Akan.”

“Of course,” Akan said as he lowered his head in respect.

He had just turned twenty-five only weeks ago. Lubba had assigned him as Sebate, or administrator. It was a great honor and he was keen to prove his worth.

Akan’s black eyes lifted, judging the level of scorn Lubba might be feeling at his rushed intrusion, but a kind face and a small smile returned. Akan relaxed and mirrored the sentiment.

Lubba stood and stepped to his friend. “I need three of our most trusted priests... go.”

Akan took a second to process the request before running off to fulfill Lubba’s wishes.

Lubba took the body of the goshawk and wrapped it in lamb’s wool. He placed it inside his robe, then grabbed the two separated wings and ran from the chapel.



The trail to the village was obscured by dust. Riders. Nudel knew no one from the palace would be coming this soon. They had a dead king to deal with.

Nudel had been waiting and planning for this moment for some time now. At the first whispers from his spies of King Gersem's turn of health, he knew there would be a small window in which to act. As a faithful Beta Jew and hakham, or rabbi, to his people, it was Nudel's duty to help the faith grow but living in an almost all-Christian empire had placed hardships of the highest levels in their direction. Those of his flock who would not convert to the new god, *Christ*, had been persecuted, even hunted down. Their numbers had dwindled and to save the Jewish faith in this land, something bold was required.

As the dust settled Nudel realized his mistake. Not riders but ten fighters jogging in his direction. Jewish foot-soldiers. They were welcomed and given food, water and a place to rest.

Since the advent of Christianity, local sentiment towards the Jews had changed, much like the smell of a fish left in the sun. *You would think we had killed their God, not the Romans*, Nudel thought.

The "Good Christians" had become hostile at times, forcing many of his followers to convert under extreme duress, even torture. As King Gersem grew older, his interest in a unified Christian Axum empire strengthened. Soldiers had sacked several synagogues, converting them into chapels with sacrilegious crosses on top. Nudel's pleas to meet with the King had been denied and after many months of bent-knee prayer, it looked as though his God was finally listening.

He stroked his beard as he paced the temporary synagogue made from animal skins, poles and ropes. At fifty-three, Nudel found his patience waning with every year that passed. Being a Nubian or Beta Jew was a source of pride and they should be leading by example, not running and hiding.

Nudel's grand plans had all but fizzled over time. His people were still semi-migratory and their numbers were on the decline. Some of his best and brightest had given up and converted to Christianity, now living in other villages or the capital. *A better and easier life should never take precedence over one's God*, he thought.

The King had died on Tuesday. Word had reached him on Wednesday. Now was the time to make his move before the new king could be crowned and respond. Nudel brushed the front of his white abaya or cloak-a nervous habit he had picked up long ago. He looked up and made a decision, exiting the tent with renewed purpose and a determined stride.

The count was smaller than he hoped for, but it was sufficient. The ten soldiers who had just arrived, plus his own, made twenty-three Jewish fighters ready to make their mark.

The goal was simple: eliminate any resistance and garrison a land of their own. A sanctuary where they could grow and worship in peace. A place they could quickly conquer and most importantly, defend. That meant the Simien mountain region to the Northwest. But first a stop at the nearest monastery. Rumors of newfound wealth and hidden diamonds had reached Nudel's ears and his people needed that wealth for his plan to work.



The Axum Empire had flourished and expanded under King Gersem, adding lands to the south and increasing trade within its borders. It now consisted of a large section of eastern Africa along the southern half of the Red Sea.

Since uniting under one religion and making Axum arguably the first Christian state in the world, King Gersem was intent on rebuilding a new Jerusalem here after the original city had been destroyed.

It was the king's desire to unite his people. The natural evolution would be to bring the Jews out of the Old Testament and into the New-by tongue or blade.

Axum's riches and abundance of gold made many things possible. It had taken a front seat to... everything-politics, trade, the church, commerce and the royals. Little held sway over the production of wealth and the magnifying of Christianity right up until his death.

Najashi stood in the ornate palace looking at the well-dressed corpse, for that is all it was. No longer a king to the empire, just another rotting carcass, something the burning incense did little to disguise.

Najashi's mortality flashed, as he wondered his place in this world. Would he be remembered or just another rotting body at the end of his days? He adjusted the tight crown on his head and scratched at his braided beard.

Najashi had been waiting for his coronation for what seemed like an eternity after the required week of mourning but patience was a kingly trait. He would have to try it out, certain it would not suit him.

At twenty-eight and oldest nephew to King Gersem, Najashi was next in line, thanks to a female only bearing queen. His broad forehead and wide black eyes were an almost exact match to his uncle's.

Najashi bowed his head as the procession exited the palace carrying the catafalque holding the King's corpse down the stone steps and into the streets. Outside, thousands had come to pay their respects and wail at the dead king's feet as he passed. Najashi followed at a respectable distance letting the people get a good look at their next King. Some called out in excitement but most were too distraught at the sight of Gersem's corpse to care about the emperor-to-be.

The procession crossed over the bridge on the River Jordan to the largest stele ever seen in the land. At 24 meters tall, the stone obelisk loomed ahead of the funeral march. It had been carved from granite and erected just a month ago, along with an extended burial chamber beneath. The practice was most likely carried down from a time when the land was known as Punt, an extension of ancient Egypt. But unlike Egypt, there was no mummification of the body.

Najashi watched as the corpse was lowered into the tomb and then took a few minutes to speak to the people. The masses gathered to listen, each hopeful that the future of the empire would be bright.



Faez's tribe had first arrived from across the Red Sea many years ago. They were fleeing persecution in Arabia and were hopeful to find a place of safety across the narrow strip of ocean. Faez truly believed he was following Allah's will.

When his tribe of Moors first arrived, King Gersem had welcomed them into his lands. The King was, after all, a good Christian, something Faez knew little about. Years later the

Prophet Muhammad himself had written in the Hadith, an appendage to the Koran, explicitly prohibiting jihad against the Axum Christians because of the King's embrace.

Now, nearly twenty-five years since the crossing, there was peace and prosperity for Faez's small band of Muslims amongst the Christians. He placed that squarely on the King's shoulders or rather, the dead King's shoulders.

Faez's mind turned to what might come next. He knew very little of the soon-to-be emperor but from his experience, royalty could be much like a starling's song, changing their tune every few minutes.

Faez's village had more than fifty mud-brick homes called maskan. There was a small square in the middle and a stout mosque next to it. The people were devout performing their salah, or prayer, five times a day.

To Faez it was paradise on earth, far from the persecution that had driven them here. May Allah forgive his pride. As a faithful Muslim and Grand Mufti of his people, Faez's responsibility was to help nurture the faith. Living in a Christian state required that growth be achieved through a growing population, rather than conversion. The Jews had tried that and it caused severe friction. Something Faez wanted nothing to do with.

The Arab's lighter olive skin in contrast to the Nubian inhabitants had made them stand out in the land but now it was time to stand out even more. Whispers had come to Faez about a planned revolt North of his village. Not something countrywide but a local skirmish designed behind the temporary loss of leadership in the state. With a little luck and Allah's blessing Faez could make a statement the new King could not ignore; something that would continue to garner favor for his people.

He gathered every camel in the village and twenty trusted armed riders. These riders were seasoned fighters who had helped maintain peace in the area. A peace Faez was willing to fight and even die for.



Abuna Lubba exited the thick wooden doors of the chapel and into the glaring sun. He squinted at the three priests Akan brought with him into the courtyard. They were wearing the more traditional gabi, the handmade cloth draped over their shoulders and wrapped around them. Two carried small knapsacks. Akan had chosen well.

Lubba decided to give it to them straight. “King Gersem has died and the Jews are using his death to make war. Christianity here is at risk. The New Jerusalem is also at risk and we must do all within our power to preserve it.”

The three young men looked horrified but stood their ground. This was not the type of thing a priest trained for.

“Not to worry my faithful servants. I have a plan,” Lubba said, as he passed out the left wing to the first man. “Take this to the capital and see that the Abuna gets it.”

The priest nodded, wondering what was so special about the stone wing.

Lubba handed the right wing to the second priest. “Go East and build a safe place to secure this. Stay there, until I or another Abuna comes for you.”

“How will you find me?”

“By your good works, my son,” Lubba said.

“I will, my Abuna.”

“Hurry now.”

Both men ran off, each in their own direction.

Dust on the horizon grew as trouble approached. It was not lost on Lubba. He turned to the final priest. “Get to chapel Beite Amharic, burn the bridge and seal the entrance. We can’t have the Jews or anyone else finding its secret.”

The priest nodded nervously.

“You can do this. I have faith in you,” Lubba said, with encouragement.

The priest hugged Lubba then turned and sprinted away.

Lubba watched him disappear before turning to Akan. “Akan, my brother.” Lubba pulled out the sheepskin-wrapped statue from his robe and handed it to him. “Take this and make a pilgrimage for only the most worthy, from Beite Amharic back to Saint Georges.”

“Are you not coming with me?”

“No, my son. This is where we part.

“I will not hear of it,” Akan said.

Lubba took the man’s right hand in his. “I’m sorry, Akan. Your journey is still ahead. Mine is here with the monastery. If God wills it, we will see each other again. If not, we will meet in paradise. But you must go now or all will be lost.”

“It is just treasure. We can find another,” Akan said.

“It is the church’s lifeblood and we must protect it with our very lives.”

Akan realized Lubba was right and shared an embrace before running away with tears streaming down his face.



Nudel kept his horse at a steady pace. It would do no good to outrun his foot soldiers. The army, if you could call it that, consisted of three camels, two horses and nineteen-foot soldiers. Each was armed with a sharpened spear, small shield and sword. Six support staff followed behind, pulling hand carts filled with food, water and a scroll of the Torah.

Some miles behind, women, children, the elderly and everything they owned brought up the rear. Several carts filled to the max were pulled by donkeys. Their dust billowed West with the hot breeze.

The landscape was mostly flat with a few tree-covered rolling hills. In the distance, a formidable mountain range touched the blue sky.

The first of the monastery's outbuildings came into view.

Nudel called out. "We are close... Divide up."

Half the soldiers moved to the right, the other half left.

Lubba stepped up to the front steps of the monastery, his monastery. Jewish warriors approached from two directions. He stood as tall as his aged shoulders would allow and cried out. "This is Christ's church. You heathens have no business here. Leave now or suffer the wrath of the King."

Nudel pulled his horse to a stop. "The King is no more. I, Abel Nudel, hakham to my people and rabbi to our God, am in charge here."

Nudel looked over the empty courtyard and the lone Abuna proudly standing on the steps of his church. "I will allow you to take your priests and leave or we will do and take what we must. I know you have diamonds and treasure hidden somewhere."

“My God has no time for scared rabbits that flee at the first sign of danger,” Lubba said, as he held firm.

“Your God is false.” Nudel nodded his head slightly to the right.

A nocked arrow from a warrior loosed. It impacted Lubba mid-chest. He fell from the steps awkwardly, his life’s work and blood on display.

Nudel watched without emotion. “Go, and find me those diamonds.”

The command had every warrior charging forward, spears at the ready.

Lubba’s last vision was the demons of Satan prevailing. It was too much to bear so he closed his eyes and let go.

The Jewish warriors destroyed everything not worth taking. Fires were lit and priests were roughly gathered and pulled to the courtyard.

Akan watched from behind a nearby hagenia tree. He was too curious to just run straight off. His precious monastery was sacked and many of the buildings were burning. The man who had been more than a father to him had been cast aside like camel dung from a sandal. His remaining brothers rounded up like goats. It was all so terrifying. His body shook with horror, suddenly realizing his mistake in staying behind to watch. This was no way to fulfill his master’s wishes. He quickly stuffed the stone statue Lubba had given him deep into his robe and grabbed his small satchel. As he turned to run, a man with a sword and raised spear stepped into his path. Akan froze.

Akan was marched and forced to his knees, joining his fellow priests in a simple straight line in the middle of the courtyard. Gold, silver and more from the chapel’s altar was piled on the

ground in front of them. Akan looked down the row; eight other brothers kneeling beside him. That meant six had gotten away or had been killed already. He said a silent prayer for his fellow priests and then just before finishing added himself to the prayer.

Nudel stepped from his horse and looked the priests over. “Who is the treasurer for this monastery?”

Jittery glances popped his direction from a few of the frightened men but no one spoke.

“Your Abuna is dead. I will give you the same chance I gave him. Tell me what I want to know and you can run from here with the sandals on your feet.”



Faez encouraged his camel to pick up the pace with a flick of his sjambok, or camel whip. His acacia wood mahawi keeping him locked in place as the animal began to gallop.

He smiled at the sound. Twenty-one camels and their riders were all bearing down on their enemy. It was marvelous.

Before them, a hazy view of a caravan of handcarts and donkeys appeared on the trail.

The fighters galloped up from behind surprising the forward-looking drivers. Screams and panic started from the rear and grew as curved swords, called scimitars dispatched any animal being used to haul belongings. Women and children ran, while a few older men stayed to fight. They were cut down without a second thought.

Faez and his men paid little attention to any of it, as his force swept through disrupting the caravan, leaving it disabled and broken in their dust.

Up ahead the cross at the top of the monastery came into view as it cleared the tree line. It was on fire.

His chief, called over, from his right. “Do you see it?”

“Yes. Allah be with us,” Faez said.

His men began their ululation battle cry.



Akan felt himself shaking as Matar, the priest to his left fell to the ground, his blood soaking the compact earth. Worst of all Matar’s lifeless eyes stared at him in confusion. He had been part of Akan’s everyday life here in the Monastery. Matar was a friendly priest with a child-like sense of humor; something he hid well around the older priests but Akan had seen it and loved it. Now he was gone and Akan was about to join Matar and the others lying dead beside him.

The blade of a very sharp sword moved to Akan’s throat and the words repeated.

“Where is the treasure trove... The diamonds?” Nudel said as he glanced over at the paltry collection of relics his men had collected so far.

Akan’s lips stuttered.

He remembered a time as a child when he and his two brothers had been accused of killing a neighbor’s chicken. Akan’s father had been furious.

They had been throwing rocks and his little brother had accidentally hit the chicken. The three boys had made an oath to remain silent despite their father’s intense interrogation and

eventual punishment. They had all remained silent. It had taken a few days before Akan and his two brothers were able to sit again but the bond between them was never stronger.

Today would be just another oath he would make between the Lord and his dead fellow priests. Akan lifted his chin and spoke. "Only the Abuna knew that... and you have killed him." "Be done with him," Nudel said, his patience now gone. He turned to the chapel confident he would discover the treasure's location, even if he had to tear the place down stone by stone. A soldier moved his blade to sweep it across the throat of the young priest.

A war cry preceded thundering hooves, suddenly echoing from every direction as camels and riders crashed into the courtyard.

It was chaos with scimitars, swinging and cleaving any Jew in their path.

Jewish warriors tried to regroup and use their spears against the huge raging beasts.

Akan dropped to the ground after the Jewish soldier who was about to dispatch him took a hack to his neck and fell gushing blood. Their fates had swapped.

Two camels and a few warriors from both sides fell during the brief battle but once Nudel was surrounded the rest of the Jewish fighters surrendered. It was over.

Nudel looked up with hatred at the lighter-skinned Arabs who surrounded him. After all his planning, he had failed his people and his God.

Faez stepped off his camel. "We will take you to the new King as a coronation present. Stopping an uprising in his kingdom should grant us additional favor and a long life in Axum."

His men cheered. Some of them started to tie up the prisoners. It was going to be a glorious day.

"Take the gold and silver as our payment," Faez said while pointing to the pile of precious relics nearby.

He turned to the downed priest. "Christian brother."

"Yes?" Akan said, standing back up slowly, his knees still weak.

"Be sure, young priest, to spread the word of our actions today," Faez said.

Akan nodded his head in gratitude. "It will be done, Grand Mufti." Akan gave the Muslim leader a slight bow and left the monastery and his dead brothers behind. He needed to get word to the capital, but first, he had a promise to Abuna Lubba to fulfill. As Akan ran, he pressed his hand to the statue hidden under his robe making sure it was secure. He would make a pilgrimage for only the most worthy of the church to follow to the greatest treasure he had ever seen.

Chapter One

Nobody wanted the job, not even the locals. Cable didn't mind; he had done worse. Just a few months ago he had waded through raw sewage to escape a bunch of armed hoodlums attempting to rob him in Mombasa. So moving the overfilled latrine to a new location was relatively simple. Cover up the old smelly hole and dig a new one. Then move the canvas privacy tent over to the new hole.

At twenty-seven years old Cable Jansen had seen a few things. If he were to ever write up a CV it would go something like:

Grew up in Lakewood east of Denver.

Played lacrosse and studied martial arts. He eventually became a good student and even played saxophone in a local band named, Rottweiler.

He worked during the summers as an intern at the History Colorado Center and could speak French and Spanish by the time he was thirteen.

Cable received a full ride to Harvard for modern and ancient linguistics and cross-disciplinary studies at the prestigious Radcliffe Institute.

Consistently at the top of his class and destined for a high-level academic career.

It was at that point where the CV took a turn. After three years of hard studying, Cable decided to take a semester off. He bought a multi-destination global airline ticket and headed East.

He remembered the ad that had first caught his attention: *24,902 Miles Circumference, 7 Billion People, Over 6,000 Languages, 1300 Destinations To More Than 190 Countries, One Ticket.*

He traveled almost halfway around the globe before deciding the world held more interest and learning than an entire lifetime of college. That was the fork in Cable's path and that was six years ago.

In spite of globalization's push forward there were thousands of unique cultures and traditions still flourishing on planet earth and Cable was eager to imbibe. He'd seen a Malagasy tribal warfare dance next to a McDonald's in Nomad, Mauritius and attended an Inuit Quviasukvik, a New Year celebration that takes place on Christmas day in Ugashik, Alaska.

Cable had been beat up in a street brawl in Prague, blessed by a monk in Bhutan, slept next to a camel in the Sahara, robbed twice in Istanbul, was inspired at the summit of Kilimanjaro and all along the way he gained many friends and expanded his considerable language skills and cultural knowledge.

Cable pulled off his tee-shirt and tossed it aside. At six foot one and two hundred pounds it is was just another chance to get in a good workout. That was, however, once the old hole was covered over, because man did it stink. Heat and feces never mixed well.

Cable adjusted the straw hat that helped keep the sun from cooking his brain. He looked out to the sea wondering if cooler weather was in his future.

The twenty-six km long island of Failaka was shaped like a slightly curved zucchini. It was just north of the equator in the Persian Gulf and the slight breeze he felt was surely coming out of an oven, not off the nearby water. The mix of loam, clay and rock made the work challenging but progress soon showed and Cable had to bend over to pull the dirt out of the deepening hole. He noticed the shovel still had the sticker on the handle from the store, Walmart. Even Kuwait City, just twenty kilometers across the water, had embraced the seduction of capitalism, a blinding plague that destroyed individualism and trapped many in a lifelong religious-like devotion to currency. Cable had seen America's unique towns and main streets give way to this cataclysm, making one town look just like the next. Its occupants were all chasing the same thing, destined to work and die in an unending chain.

The shovel hit hard with a twang and Cable let out a sigh, another rock. He used the blade to clear the loose soil away. The rock was flat, unnaturally flat. Cable reached down and brushed the last of the dirt off to get a better look. The flat stone had carved unrecognizable letters on it. He stood and looked East.

The camp was a collection of tents and overhead tarps used for shade. Tables were lined up underneath, some were used for eating, some held computers, and some displayed samples. The French, American, Kuwaiti Kuwaiti-sponsored dig had discovered evidence of Christian occupation before the Muslims. It was a significant find so deep into the Moorish empire.

Beyond the camp was a cloud of dust identifying the actual dig that was going on. Stacked stone walls with many inner-connecting rooms stood out in the bright sun. Zuhail Injera, the Find Manager and a local hire out of Kuwaiti City, stood tall next to a group of researchers

and students as they lifted a meter-tall intact stone cross out of the dirt. Across from Zuhail was the Site Manager, Hilary Lavigne. She shared a triumphant smile with Zuhail that nearly knocked him over. He had longed for such attention and even though it was over an artifact, he welcomed it.

Dr. Hilary Lavigne was a recent graduate from the prestigious Sorbonne Université in archeology. As a child, she had always been fascinated by history. She loved the stories even the simplest of artifacts could tell. She grew up on the outskirts of Lyon to a French father and English mother, a bitter combination that carried the weight of historical rivals into their relationship. Hilary had taken the job in Kuwait, eager to prove herself and if she was honest, it was also to put even more distance between her and home life.

The cross was carried and set on a waiting table in the camp. Fala Aziz, the Excavation Director from Kuwait, stepped up to inspect it. She was in her mid-forties with dark eyes and pale features. Her hijab was light brown, contrasting her darker pants and blouse, a mix of modern, practical and traditional. She carried a small umbrella to keep the sun off her head, which she lowered once under the shade of the tarp. As a devout Muslim she had a passion for walking the true path but also for her country's past. Various religions have played a strong role throughout its history; each worthy of at least a bold footnote.

“Incredible. Let's get it cleaned up and Hilary make an etching of it,” Fala said, with a hint of pride.

Hilary nodded and assigned two workers to start the cleaning process.

Cable walked up speaking perfect Arabic. “Fala, I have found something you should look at.”

“I thought you were digging the new latrine? Praise Allah, I hope it’s not an unexploded bomb.”

Failaka Island had a long sordid history, due to its strategic location near the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers with the sea. Starting with its early Mesopotamian settlements, to Alexander the Great’s interests and now the local Arab occupants, the remote island had been a home and a battlefield.

In 1990 the Iraqis invaded and removed all civilians from the island, mining the beaches and using the buildings as target practice. The Allies evicted the Iraqis a year later and established a temporary base on the island during the war.

After Operation Desert Storm, the mines were removed but few Kuwaitis returned, leaving most of the island desolate and in disrepair.

Hilary followed Fala over to the other side of the camp where Cable had been digging. Over the last six weeks, despite their political differences, Hilary and Cable had become close friends. He looked up as the two women approached. Hilary’s long brown hair moved with the breeze and when she saw him looking her way, impossibly white teeth glowed back at him.

Fala, without meaning to, interrupted their moment. “So what have you got?”

Cable gestured down the hole. “Take a look.”

Fala bent down and studied the inscriptions on the flat stone for a minute. “We hired you as an interpreter, not a digger.” She stood slowly on tired knees. “But it appears you have many talents.” She glanced at Hilary and Cable wondering if they picked up her double meaning at their burgeoning relationship. Fala dusted her hands off, the dirt here could be very powdery and worked its way into every crevasse. “I don’t immediately recognize the symbols. I can tell you

it's old, maybe Sumerian. We'll need to dig it up and get a better look at it. Do a little research...

Sorry, but it looks like you will have to dig a new latrine somewhere else."

"Bialtabe," of course, Cable said.

"Ask Hilary to get some diggers on this right away."

Cable switched from Arabic to French in a single beat. But before he could get the words out, Hilary piped up.

"I'll get this roped off and we can start digging."