

# The AMULET

## Prologue

Eastern Palestine

February 18, 1947 9:28am

It was already hot. And it was only morning. So it went. For twelve hours each day, every day, a seething self-luminous giant angrily asserted itself over this bleak desert terrain as it had for millions of years past...branding it with its fierce light and blistering heat before returning twelve hours later to brand it again. Clouds that tried to challenge the searing authority of this cosmic power could offer no more than fleeting cover against a relentless solar assault that long ago had desiccated this part of the world. Only the pale limestone cliffs, barren plateaus, craggy rock formations and hardy plants that sparsely dotted the vast expanse of desert wilderness were oblivious to the brutal effects of this monstrous inferno. This was the scathing land upon which Ali lived with his father, mother and two brothers.

He was the youngest of three sons. But not too young to be handed the mundane task of tending the family's small flock of sheep. Not much was left of the tough flora where the sheep usually ate. So Ali needed to find fresh brush and grasses upon which the sheep could feed. There was a path he'd never taken.

From its unworn and rocky appearance, he knew few had ventured this way in a long time. With difficulty, he managed to guide the animals in a direction to which they were unaccustomed. Twenty hard minutes later, to Ali's relief and delight, scattered clusters of plants came into view. Seeing the food, the hungry sheep immediately began moving towards it. As they began eating, Ali turned his attention to new surroundings and vistas.

In every direction the boy looked was a familiar yet harsh, torrid, almost alien landscape. But as Ali continued to survey the daunting scenery, he spotted something unfamiliar...an opening in the side of a cliff about two hundred meters distant. His curiosity exploded! Leaving the sheep to their meal, Ali quickly set out to explore this mystery. But getting there took time and considerable effort. Finally, out of breath, the boy stood at the entrance to what was indeed the mouth of a cave, its foreboding entrance staring him in the face. A bit frightened now, Ali remained where he was...looking in...wondering if he had the courage to *go* in. The thought of the sheep wandering away and what his father might say or do to him should he lose even one of them made him apprehensive. Two seconds later, Ali entered the cave.

His steps were deliberately small. He tepidly called out...just in case. The echoes of his voice were unnerving as they reverberated far down the stone walls...a colubrine tunnel that seemed to have no end. It scared yet beckoned him. A heart started beating faster. Temptations of treasure flitted through Ali's head even as fright shoved them out. He heard the cave whisper to him...*take another step...take another step*. Inhaling deeply, Ali slowly, cautiously, moved deeper into this tenebrous cavity hewn of rock. As he did, his eyes darted everywhere, looking for anything of value though he was very much on edge, on guard, every sense on alert, ready to turn and dash out at the first hint of danger, real or imagined. Behind him, the entrance was no longer

visible. Only a vague indirect light could be seen to remind him of the world he left for this one.

As Ali's distance from the entrance kept increasing, so did the surrounding darkness. With each step ahead, a measure of the curiosity that brought him here began to be replaced by an equal measure of trepidation. He placed his left hand against the cave wall. Its hardness reassured him...offering a momentary feeling of comforting solidity against the untouchable blackness encircling him. Still, he had to summon courage to keep going. Six paces later, the boy *shrieked*. The hazy outline of a skeleton was at his feet. Now beginning to tremble, it took *all* of Ali's courage to continue. This deathly obscurity through which he was moving...an ancient darkness that lived here...was made worse by the cave's stark quietude. Together, they created an overwhelmingly eerie and scary atmosphere. Ali had no flashlight or torch by which to fight back. Without either of these things to combat the suffocating darkness that threatened to swallow him, the absolute limit of the boy's nerve had been reached. Treasure or no treasure, all he wanted was to get out of there as fast as he could. However, in turning to leave, Ali's foot made sharp contact with something in the shadows. Fear instantly shot through him. His eyes strained as he tensely looked down, hoping to see nothing move. What Ali could see was the merest outline of something oddly familiar. Tentatively reaching for it, he realized to his great surprise he'd found a large sealed clay jar. The discovery *thrilled* the boy, his great angst of only a second ago almost forgotten. With a child's innocence and optimism, Ali imagined he now possessed something that would end the poverty of his family. At that moment, however, the thought of the sheep roared back into consciousness, abruptly casting aside his flirtation with the thought of riches. It was well past time to return. But the jar would go with him. Exiting the cave, it took some time for his eyes to adjust to the violent brilliance. But in this brilliance, he now felt safe. The

cave could wait for his next visit...if there ever were a next visit. Ali struggled not to drop the bulky container as he made his way back to the sheep where, fortunately for him, they were resting...full from their morning meal. None was missing.

As Ali guided the flock slowly back to the house, he wondered what could be inside the jar. No matter how hard he shook it, no sound could be heard. His dream of gold, coins or jewels therefore was at an end. But those things were far less valuable than what was in *this* jar. What Ali had found in the cave was something no one could possibly believe to even exist...or believe *who* had secreted it there. No longer bathed in shadows but now exposed to the intense light of the desert sun, the jar's meaning would not be known for almost another fifty years even though it would be opened this very day.

Damascus, Syria

April 17, 1947 3:35pm

Baahir Alzahabi peered out the window. No one was approaching. Satisfied he could conduct business with his English customer beyond the prying eyes of anyone that might object to what he did for a living...buying and selling looted antiquities... the man reached outside to pull the shutters towards him, locking them. The door had already been bolted. A trap door in the next room led to a tunnel that exited in an alley across the street. So far he had not had to use it. His business carried its risks. For the customer, too. And this particular customer was decidedly nervous.

“Hurry up, Baahir! I haven't got all day! Show me this thing you said is impossible to believe.” Mr. Alzahabi nodded in response to the barked command expressing impatience. Entering another room, the Syrian quickly returned holding a capped metal cylinder about sixty centimeters in length. Placing one end on a

table, he opened the container and extracted its contents. Gerald Ward watched intensely.

“Now you will see what I mean!” exclaimed the old man, smiling confidently at the Englishman that had flown from London Airport to inspect this relic. In fact, Sir Gerald Ward was one of a number of customers of Baahir Alzahabi...wealthy people that collected black market artifacts of extinct communities, cultures and nations. In his fashionable home in the Belgravia area of London was a secret room, one only he knew was there. In that room he admired his trophies, the many illegal acquisitions of his clandestine dealings with individuals like Alzahabi. Given the size and rarity of the items in his collection, Gerald was convinced he was one of the world’s foremost private collectors of antiquities...even if no one knew it.

Finally exposed, the relic rested on the table. Though Baahir had seen it numerous times already, he still could not help but feel a strange wonder about it.

“Is it not how I described to you? Is it not amazing to behold? Even *I* have never seen anything like this!” Gerald, now viewing for the first time what this man had previously described to him in superlatives, took his eyes off the object to regard his host as though he were crazy.

“You expect me to believe this is an antiquity?! I came from London to look at *this*? What did you do...hire someone to make this so you could swindle me?” The ugly reaction immediately put Mr. Alzahabi on the defensive.

“Mr. Ward, I swear! There is no deception here! You must believe me! Upon seeing it for the first time, I, too, thought what you are thinking now. So I traveled to speak with the boy that found it. His family is very poor, Mr. Ward. They live in the desert. He told me that what you see before you was hidden in a cave...inside a sealed jar! That explains why it looks as it does!”

“No, it doesn’t! Sealed jar or not, *no one* would think this is

real.”

“There is nothing more I can tell you, sir. If you do not wish it for yourself, that is your right. There are others I can contact that may see this...differently...than you do, perhaps.”

Sir Gerald Ward, wanting to be magnificently impressed by an ancient artifact that brought him to Damascus, was now consumed with frustration. Baahir had never lied to him. It could be the relic was something distinctly unique after all. So he would take it. But the price would be negotiated to compensate him for his discontent. Haggling for a minute, the transaction was concluded. The collector left the small house, cylinder in hand.

Belgravia, London

May 25, 1965 2:35pm

Frantic calls began pouring in. Neighbors told of dark smoke leaving through windows of a residence on Chamberlain Court, a burning manse that happened to belong to Sir Gerald Ward. Bells started ringing in a number of nearby fire stations. By the time the first brigade arrived on scene, flames were leaping out second floor windows. The battle was on. Thick streams and heavy sprays of water attacked the formidable fire. Two hours later, it was over. The fire had won. But Gerald knew nothing of this. He was casually en route home from a business trip in Paris.

By the time Gerald's taxi turned onto his street, weary soot-darkened firemen were furling hoses, getting ready to leave. Aghast at the sight of the smoldering remains of his house, Gerald bolted from his taxi to stand on the sidewalk, hands on his hips, enveloped in gaping shock and disbelief. What was once a place of importance, stature and honor was no longer there...transmorgified into ashes and smoke...the magnificent furnishings within heated to extinction. His private viewing room was on the second floor.

There was no second floor. Only the land, soot-blackened masonry of the lower floor and four martyred stone columns that still cried out in their pain were left. The exquisite splendor and elegance of this address, so prominent when the sun came up earlier this day, now lived only in photographs and memories, a harsh anticlimax to its former hauteur and prestige.

Five minutes later, the last firetruck left to return to its station. A minute after that, Gerald passed through what used to be an elegant front door. Walking on wet, scorched and ash-strewn floors, he was surrounded by very little. Interior walls and the roof had burned away...the sun now visible overhead...an unwelcome sight. The stench of so much incinerated wood was nearly unbearable. Despondently, Gerald continued moving through the gutted structure, each footstep leaving an imprint on the ugly dark powder beneath his feet. Just three strides later, something on the floor made him stop. Strangely, a color other than that of the residue of fire caught his eye...a color of *life*. Incredibly, something had escaped the terrible conflagration. And from the look of it, it wasn't charred, not blackened, not even dark. Startled by this mysterious sight, the man reached down to take hold of what little he could see of it, almost all of it hidden under a blanket of extinguished embers and ash. And upon drawing it out, Gerald could scarcely believe his eyes. Incredibly, in his hand was the so-called relic he'd reluctantly purchased from a Syrian man eighteen years ago. Intact. Pristine. *Unburned*...looking as it always had. Yet the large and elegant gilded frame he had made years ago to display it was nowhere to be seen. Ashes like everything else. But *not* this. It was as though there was no fire. *It's...not...possible*, Gerald told himself in a state of incredulity. Yet as he held it, minutely looking for any sign of damage yet seeing nothing of the sort, his hands began to tremble. How could this have survived?! His frightened thought would produce no answer.

## Atarot Airport, Jerusalem

June 9, 1965 12:10pm

A passenger from London got off the plane. In his hand was a metal storage cylinder. Seeing him, two men walked briskly in his direction.

“Gerald Ward?”

“And you are?” The men looked at each other, nodded, and flashed their identification.

“I’m Joren Kollek, and this is my colleague, Aaron Chertok. We’re from the Israeli Department of Antiquities.” The visitor appeared relieved to see them.

“Good. Here.” said the man, reaching out to hand over the container he’d brought with him. But the hands of the men from IDA remained by their sides. Immediately impatient, Gerald snapped, “Go on...take it! That was our arrangement! I told you I don’t want the bloody thing anymore.” Now tentatively accepting what was offered, Mr. Chertok slowly unscrewed the lid, looked inside for several seconds and then re-sealed the container. There was no pleasure on his face.

“Where did you get this, Mr. Ward?” was the question, suspiciously asked.

“Let’s just say it’s been in the family for a long time,” was the reply, evasively given. Chertok scoffed at the reply.

“Is that right? Yet here you are anxious to turn over what you say is a haunted antiquity...that it would not burn. Frankly, Mr. Ward, we wonder what your true motivation is here.” The visitor didn’t like whatever the man from IDA was insinuating.

“Getting rid of it is my only motivation. I’m afraid of it.” Joren Kollek chose to speak.

“We will examine this...antiquity...as you say it is...but do not expect us to believe you.”

“Believe what you want. But I tell you this...” Pointing at the

cylinder for emphasis, the man continued, "...that thing isn't natural. Nothing could have survived that fire...but *it* did. And wait until you see it. Try to explain *that* if you can. It doesn't matter what you think of me. But you better be careful of it. If it can survive a fire, who knows what else it can do? Now good day to you both." And, with that, Sir Gerald Ward left the men standing where he'd met them.

Joren and Aaron were back at the IDA office within the hour. The relic had garnered the attention of many within IDA that came to see it for themselves. All noted the relic's appearance was unblemished...perfect. For that reason alone, it was simply regarded as counterfeit. The last person to examine it told Aaron to throw it out. Aaron smiled at his friend, Joren.

"You didn't believe that nut at the airport for one second, did you?" No, he didn't believe that nut. But just as he was about to give the order to dispose of it, the thought mysteriously *vanished* from his mind.

"Leave it in its container, catalog it and put in the archive. When we have nothing better to do, I'll have someone take a good look at it." The cylinder was not touched again for thirty years.

Israeli Antiquities Authority, Jerusalem

December 23, 1995 2:13am

For six hours they had feverishly worked. Jonah Shahar and Isaac Mendelson had entered the basement laboratory six hours ago to attempt to uncover the meaning of a forgotten relic. In a near panic over what they'd found, Jonah hurriedly walked to the desk and picked up the phone. A brief yet animated discussion ensued with the only person expecting his call at this time of night, Shahar sounded his emphatic agreement to something, slammed down the phone and quickly turned to face his colleague.

“The director is right!” he said breathlessly. “We have no choice! We have to think of the consequences should knowledge of this ever become known to the world!” An older man with pale blue eyes and graying hair, Jonah was deeply afraid and looked it. “What we have discovered must never leave this room!” Dr. Mendelson immediately became alarmed. He could only hope Jonah didn’t intend to do something reckless. But in the next second he heard a command that made his blood run *cold*.

“Turn it on!” Isaac’s worst fear had just come true.

“Turn it on?” The man was incredulous. “Are you out of your mind?! It’s *forbidden!* You know that now! We can’t treat this thing as though we have control over it...as though it’s some ordinary antiquity...some inanimate object! You’ve seen what it can do. We all have! We can’t take the chance!” The words had no effect. Jonah was intolerant.

“Do as I say!”

“No...I won’t!” exclaimed Isaac, now scared for his *life*. “It is madness to even think of doing such a thing! Come to your senses!”

Jonah shot back, “If you won’t do it, I will!” Picking up the relic, the man began to walk rapidly in the direction of the machine. Isaac quickly moved to block his friend’s way. He was *desperate* to stop him.

“NO, Jonah! Use your head! Think of what you are doing!” Pointing to the item in his hands, Isaac implored, “You are holding something that is as far above us as we are to a...a gnat! Do not do this! It’s too dangerous! Put it down, Jonah! PUT IT DOWN!”

Jonah paid no attention, pushing Isaac aside, saying,

“Listen to you! I never thought you of all people would believe such a fairy tale! Get out of my way!”

Seconds later, the worst sounds of human screaming ever heard were everywhere in the building. Even in the short time it took armed security guards in a full run to reach the laboratory, their

presence was useless. Inexplicably, their passkeys would not work, each guard frenetically trying his own to no avail. Left with no other recourse, they pounded on the doors, crying out the names of those screaming for their lives on the other side, only meters away, pleading with them to open the doors. It was all in vain. The deafening, tortured, almost inhuman cries of pain...cries of terror...continued unabated. And the doors remained closed. There was nothing more the guards could do but listen to the horrible screams. Yet, in the next second, silence...complete silence...a *sickening* silence. The men nervously glanced at each other, all of them frightened, all of them at a loss to understand any of this or know what to do next. Then, to their unimaginable surprise and alarm, the lab doors slowly swung open *on their own*, a ghostly invitation daring them to enter.

The event could not be explained. The IAA was *terrified*. All work on the relic was immediately and permanently suspended. The lab was sealed shut.