

Chapter 1. Pittsburgh, Saturday, December 11, 3 AM

The museum guard lay on the splinters of glass, face down, one eye open, staring at the camel's hooves. Blood bubbled from a small cut on his throat, a rivulet of red trickling onto the fine desert sand. His body was half in the desert, half on the cold marble floor. A small pool of urine crept down his black pants, pooling at his shoes.

On the sand, a Barbary lioness lay dead beneath the camel. The rifle that killed her, a one-ball flintlock, rested across her hindquarters, spent. Her attack had been camouflaged, a low, yellow dune ferociously come to life. She had sprung on them from the front, an Arab courier astride his Dromedary, crossing the Tunisian desert in the sulfurous heat of midday. Until that moment the courier had been comfortably cool in his burnouse, the long, loose, black-hooded cloak, and the red Berber headdress under the hood. Until that moment his rifle had been lashed to the saddle, and his jambiya, the dagger with the sharply curved blade and enameled handle, sheathed under his burnouse.

The lioness had hurtled herself toward the camel's neck. The courier pulled back on the reins, fighting to control the camel's frenzied bucking. He fumbled for the rifle, raised it to the lioness' head and shot her through the skull. Almost immediately, her mate, a powerful male with a massive mane, leapt on them from the side. He sank his front claws into the camel's hump and shoulder and anchored his right hind leg into the camel's shinbone, until he hung there, slowly pulling them down. The camel bellowed, lips splayed back in pain. His legs began to buckle.

Frantic, the courier drew the dagger from under his burnouse and plunged the steel blade toward the lion's neck. With an immense roar, the lion lunged up at the courier, jaws agape, his massive carnassial teeth about to rip off the courier's arm.

The assailant calmly took a box cutter, needle and thread from a duffle bag, knelt in the sand under the camel, made a small, careful slit with the box cutter along the sewn seam of the belly, removed the straw stuffing from the cavity, reached in, and carefully extracted a small bundle wrapped in a brown-stained cloth. It shed bits of fiber and flesh onto the straw and sand. As the assailant threaded the needle, a siren wailed in the distance. Police. The assailant slipped the box cutter, needle, thread and bundle into the duffle and carried it away.